I'll Let Atlas Fall

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Relationships:	Grayson | Purpled & TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF), Technoblade & TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF), Technoblade & TommyInnit & Phil Watson | Philza, Aimee | Aimsey & Toby Smith | Tubbo, FitMC/Tarik Pacanhan | Pactw
Characters:	TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF), Aimee | Aimsey (Video Blogging RPF), Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF), Phil Watson | Philza, Toby Smith | Tubbo, Cassie Anne | Snifferish, Guqqie (Video Blogging RPF), Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF), Grayson | Purpled (Video Blogging RPF), Charlie Dalgleish | Slimecicle, FitMC (Video Blogging RPF), Baghera Jones, and more???
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Superheroes/Superpowers, Alternate Universe - Dystopia, Vigilante TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF), TommyInnit-centric (Video Blogging RPF), Aimee | Aimsey-centric (Video Blogging RPF), BAMF TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF), Near Death Experiences, It Gets Worse Before It Gets Better, Moral Ambiguity, Drugs, A Darker Tone Than The First, my political biases are showing and i do not give a fuck anymore, Hero Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF), Protective Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF), Grayson | Purpled Angst (Video Blogging RPF), Secret Identity, Identity Reveal, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, i'm more pissed at the world and even more political than i was in 2023, relax about the "chose not to use archive warnings", BAMF Grayson | Purpled (Video Blogging RPF), BAMF Aimee | Aimsey (Video Blogging RPF), bunch of cool bitches doing cool crimes
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I'll Let Atlas Fall

by ellis (ellabellachicketychella)

Summary

It turns out that… no, the universe is not kind enough so that Tommy could get a damn break from the mess that is his life. Having quit being Theseus, Tommy is too aware of the rising tension in L'Manberg because of his disappearance as Theseus. And he is all too aware of the different factions all clambering for the final chance to end this all.

It's not that Tommy thinks he deserves this at all, it's just sometimes he think his life is one large punchline that only the universe is in on. Sometimes he genuinely thinks that he needs to put his head through a window.

He's done a lot of wrong in his life. But does he deserve this? Does he really?

---

or, TINAAOS part 2 (ideally can be read as a stand alone we will see)

Notes

Welcome to I'll Let Atlas Fall (acronym fucking ILAF or TINA2 will be accepted begrudgingly.)

THIS IS A CONTINUATION OF THE TINAAOS STORY AND ARCS FROM THAT FIC, JUST THROWN INTO A NEW FIC

This picks up about two or three days after TINAAOS Chapter 45, (IF YOU NEED A REFRESHER OF THE ENTIRE PLOT. GUESS WHAT.
HERE I HAVE ALL THE CHAPTER SUMMARIES.)

My intention of this is that it CAN be read as a standalone (but also there's like 500k of backstory and development that got all these guys here.)

SHORTHAND VERSION:

- TOMMY WAS A VIGILANTE. HE QUIT BECAUSE THE POWER GOT TO HIS HEAD AND HE KEPT HURTING PEOPLE. ALSO HIS POWERS STOPPED WORKING

- PURPLED IS A VIGILANTE. TECHNO IS A FORMER VIGILANTE WHO WAS FORCED TO BECOME A HERO BUT HATES IT. PHIL IS STRUGGLING WITH BEING ALIVE TBH
- AIMSEY WAS FORCED TO BE A HERO IN CHAPTER 37 AND THEN DECIDED TO CREATE A GROUP TO OVERTHROW THE HERO COMMITTEE NAMED ANEMOI
- THERE IS A GROUP NAMED ELYSIUM. THEY WANT THE HEROES GONE.
- LOGSTEDCHIRE (A DISTRICT OF THIS FICTIONAL COUNTRY) HAS CURFEWS AND A LARGE POLICE PRESENCE. PROTESTING!!!
- TUBBO GOT ARRESTED BECAUSE OF ANEMOI'S MISSION TO GET INFO ON WILLIAM NELSON-JONES. HE SUCCEEDED.
- ALSO SAM KNOWS WHO THESEUS AND PURPLED ARE AND ALSO WANTS TOMMY DEAD. THIS IS IMPORTANT.

See the end of the work for more notes

begin

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Case 257913: String of Thefts [1/2]

Case No: 257913
Date: 16/11/2011
Reporting Head Hero: Sam Warren
Prepared by: Briana Hodges

Summary: In the early hours of November 16th Levi's Jewellery was robbed in a string of robberies across Upper L'Manberg's high quality goods stores. This includes other jewellery stores and . While most perpetrators were arrested, it is believed two, maybe even more go away. Detail: Heroes were rerouted to the incident when it was discovered multiple stores were being targeted at once for no perceived reason. At 4:17am the first alarms at Levi's Jewellery went off, alerting heroes to the thefts.

At 4:19am a security alarm at Contemporary Canvas, alerting the heroes to a chain of events. The original two heroes on the job were joined by four other heroes in order to find and arrest all of the people involved. A total of six heroes responded to the incident.

Twelve people were eventually caught and arrested, Sam Warren believes that there were two others who got away with other stolen goods but couldn't be tracked. These two are believed to have stolen a large amount of jewellery and perhaps were even able to get away by pretending to be an Upper L'Manberg married couple.

The recovered stolen goods added up to $120,000 USD in art, clothing and jewellery. It is currently unknown where these were going to be sold, or who coordinated this effort. It could be attached to gang affiliations in Logstedchire, or just be part of a large coordinated smuggling effort across L'Manberg.

Another report is needed to establish the perpetrators, interviews and the response to the incidents.

Case 257914: Apartment Collapse [1/28]

Case No: 257914
Date: 16/11/2011
Reporting Head Hero: Phil Craft
Prepared by: Gabriella Lang

Summary: In the early hours on November 16th, load bearing structures in the Astra Apartment Complex sustained significant damage from explosives. This then set off a chain of events that caused the apartment complex to collapse on residents inside, killing and injuring them. More details will come out as time goes on.

Detail: At 4:23am on the 16/11/2011 there were loud explosions heard from the basement and lower levels of Astra Apartment Complex. The Astra Apartment Complex is three storeys high and a lot of people with lower income reside there. It has been involved in ongoing investigations into Astaroth and Lamia, along with investigations into meeting places for both Business Bay and the Sapphire Soldiers, two major gang presences in Logstedchire. The heard explosions took out nine load bearing structures including columns and walls. The complex had been built poorly, presumably to cut costs, which then led to a chain reaction until the complex lost stability and fell in on itself.

While some were able to get out there was a large majority of people who were unable to get out without injuries. It is unclear who is to blame for the explosives and the collapse, potential suspects and organisations behind the group include Business Bay and the recently formed Sapphire Soldiers.

The dead and missing are still being counted and reported for, but as of current there could be as high as thirty people dead as officials work on sorting through the rubble for survivors and bodies alike. Heroes Quasar and Orthos are thought to have died in the collapse, entering the building when it was partially collapsed and have not been seen since. Afterwards heroes were not seen until one hour after the collapse due to a build up of work that had accumulated over an otherwise busy night.

Internal Review of Cases 257913 and 257914

Date: 2/12/2011
Reporting Head: William Nelson-Jones
Prepared by: Olivier Ochoa

After a review of the allocation of heroes in both Case 257913: [String of Thefts] and Case 257914: [Apartment Collapse]. After a thorough review from the hero committee the conclusion has been reached that no error in the allocation of heroes were made. The heroes were effectively used to prevent financial harm, and the apartment collapse was dealt with the best that it could have been. The review has come to the conclusion that more heroes on the site of the apartment collapse would not have helped the people effected by it, and may have just caused the preventable deaths of more heroes. This would have been to the adverse affect for both L'Manberg and the security of the country as a whole.

No recommendations are to be made based on the events of either cases.

Chapter End Notes

hey welcome to the tinaaos sequel, and by sequel i mean it's a continuation of the original story.

this plot is about rebellion, caring and that like... love is going to be there for these people and that matters. to me this is a more cleaned up version of what tinaaos was about, i'm not gonna take the other fic down because that's dumb. love you all, take care and thank you for the genuinely lovely comments while i took my time figuring out what to do with tinaaos.

sending all my love, take care of yourselves <3

traitors

Chapter Summary

> Fit can nearly ignore that inside the folder only a few steps away is a picture of a teenager vigilante.
>
> He can almost ignore that over the top of the picture, in large red letters is one simple word.
>
> *ELIMINATE*.

or, welcome to the first thing picking up from tinaaos chapter 45!

Chapter Notes

> and now we establish… some of the trigger warnings, instead of putting one on every chapter i am planning on putting most of them here. NOW there are exceptions for things i've forgotten or when it's particularly rough. For example, there is a particularly rough chapter in the future that will be tagged with body horror and graphic depictions of violence because… oh boy.
>
> Otherwise, have a list of trigger warnings for MOST of 'I'll Let Atlas Fall':
>
> **TRIGGER WARNINGS:** character death, graphic depictions & descriptions of violence, guns, knives, drugs, overdosing, needles, injections, child abuse, body horror, vomiting, heights, general spiralling, blood, kidnapping, dehumanising treatment, panic attacks, depressive episodes, systematic violence and oppression
>
> Generally this fic is darker than TINAAOS, think of it like how the percy jackson books get darker as you get older! This story has matured with me and it will reflect that. THIS IS NOT A COMPREHENSIVE LIST! This is just a lot of the common ones found throughout this fic

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One of the first things Fit had to learn is that sometimes murder… is just murder, it's nothing personal.

A file in his hand feels like a file in his hands no matter what— he's got plenty of these at this point. People he's had to take out, people he's had to arrest, Fit has no conceivable reason

to feel any differently about this one.

Maybe it's the fact he's sure this one is a teenager. Maybe it's the fact that it hasn't been personal like this in years, maybe it's the fact he knows why he was sent this one and the fact *he* was sent this one makes his stomach turn.

He reaches for the coffee cup on the table with a gentle sigh, he takes a drink that does nothing to help fight off the exhaustion before resting the cup on the arm of the couch. He knows he's not supposed to do that, and he's yelled at the kids enough times for doing it but still he's doing it because of course he is.

"Due to the weakened security as a result of the recent attack by terrorist group Elysium a data security breach—"

Fit taps his fingers against the file in front of him.

Purpled.

" —bo Underscore broke into the chair of the Hero Committee, William Nelson-Jones's office."

The information he has on the kid really isn't a lot. Some grainy photos of him in his vigilante outfit, with a hoodie that can not be practical and a mask that has thankfully gotten more professional since Theseus disappeared.

"— expected court date in two weeks."

Fit flicks through one of the maps Cellbit has provided, a suspected average route for Purpled. It mostly has him flicking around the most prominent protesting locations in Logstedchire, sometimes on the border of Lower L'Manberg or even dipping into Kinoko briefly.

He seems to duck to the same place in Kinoko every time, at least, that's what Fit is going to assume considering all the common routes in different colours end up at the same point, a mess of colourful pencil.

Thank you Cellbit for that one.

"Elysium has not taken responsibility for the breach, but it is not thought to be a solo act."

Fit sighs, reaching for the remote.

He couldn't care less about the security breach if he physically tried.

"Where is Theseus?"

Purpled is well known for having been by Theseus's side almost always for a good span of two months, the two months when everything was going wrong.

"—fter the Kinoko library incident where he nearly killed several people, including heroes, in the span of a week."

Someone else has been assigned to deal with Theseus though, Fit isn't allowed to know who, the same way that person isn't allowed to know that Fit has been assigned to. Privately he thinks that Purpled has to die second, Theseus is too powerful to be left by himself like that. Fit knows how much a man without anything will do to survive, he's afraid what a boy with nothing left to lose will do to get revenge.

"—suspected to be responsible for the Blue transformation recently seen in Techno—"

Someone else has been assigned to Aurelian and yet again someone else has been assigned to Slime.

Charlie is tricky. He always has been. He's survived this long so far.

Still, the knowledge that someone out there is trying to bring Slime in after all of this time is… it doesn't quite sit right in his stomach.

Aurelian is also a problem, of course she is. She has a quiet strength the media tends to understate, she has also been around for… enough of Theseus's worst moments.

"—deleted Twitter account where he was once incredibly active, which was once a source of his fame and popularity."

Fit rolls his eyes at the TV, his eyes dart back down to the folder like any new information is going to show up from him just looking at it. Suspected identities, locations and regular routes, seeming connections and perhaps even friends. Fit already has learnt it all, he's good at his job after all.

"Theseus is incredibly well known for exasperating riots and protests, it's like he's become some sort of symbol, Connie!"

There's a thump and a quiet noise from the room over.

Fit can feel himself raising an eyebrow.

Ramón is standing in front of him, smiling brightly. He has the goggles on the top of his head that he hasn't taken off in weeks, they push up the back of his hair making Ramón's hair look even shaggier (somehow. *Somehow.*)

He's wearing a red blanket wrapped around him.

They both look at each other for a moment.

"What exactly are you doing, Ramón?"

Ramón grins at him, "I'm being Theseus, Fit."

Fit very much fights the urge to stab a knife through his one good arm, “are you now? That seems a bit dangerous.”

Ramón punches the air, his form is awful and if he ever actually hits someone like that he will almost certainly break his hand. But something inside of Fit is glad that Ramón doesn’t have to learn how to punch, not like Fit did, not like Fit’s friends had to.

As carefully as possible Fit closes the manila folder.

He smiles as he shoots off the couch, wrapping both arms around Ramón and lifting him up into the air as Ramón squeals with laughter.

“I’m the hero, I’m here to arrest you for being a vigilante!”

Ramón screeches even more, kicking his legs out.

“Now, where are your siblings?”

“Em is in her room, Richas is also in her room. They’re gonna be Aurelian and Purpled!”

“That sounds very fun,” Fit says.

Fit can nearly ignore that inside the folder only a few steps away is a picture of a teenager vigilante. He can almost ignore that over the top of the picture, in large red letters is one simple word.

ELIMINATE .

Aimsey knows panic.

Aimsey knows when things go *so* terribly wrong. Xe went to a protest *one time* and is now a hero for it. They know how things work and when things go wrong and how awful and terrible it can be.

This is something else.

Tubbo’s *fucking gone* and Aimsey was partially responsible for it.

Fuck.

The panic is gripping their body to the point where Aimsey is starting to almost feel calm, a sense of relaxation can almost roll over them as they stare down at the impromptu meeting that’s been called in front of them all.

This room used to almost be comforting— the room in Schlatt’s house that was theirs, Tubbo crouching by computers, late nights looking for information, planning and laughing and all the things you’re not supposed to do while overthrowing the government.

Aimsey is at the table in the middle, staring straight ahead at the wall across from them. There's what looks like a relatively new addition of a poster, it's a poster of Theseus, probably bought from a market or something. It's scribbled all over with notes, mostly critiquing the impracticalities of the suit.

She remembers Ranboo and Tubbo working on it one night, Tubbo giggling the entire time as Ranboo looked mildly unimpressed with the entire endeavour.

Guqqie is sitting in a chair, head in hands.

Ranboo's eyes are also on the poster, eyes tracing over the words again and again like those words are going to find Tubbo and break him out of whatever prison he's in.

Sniff is pacing backwards and forwards, chewing on the edge of their nails as she thinks. "What do we do?" Sniff must bite off a bit of their nail because they lean back and scowl at their nails, "what *can* we do— we don't have any bargaining chips we're willing to give up do we?"

"We give the information back over," Ranboo says.

"Then that defeats the entire purpose of the *reason* Tubbo got arrested," Guqqie returns, she paces up and down.

"Well, we can't just leave him there to rot!" Ranboo returns.

Aimsey rests her head on the desk, and for a moment she thinks about what her life would be like if literally anything else happened. They sigh, tiredly. Of course they promise nothing would happen to Tubbo then this happens.

"What do we have? We have the USB," Aimsey throws the USB onto the table where it skids a little bit. "We have all of this information, we have the potential for blackmail. We have Schlatt who probably can get access to a decent legal team, and we have connections within the tower who are more loyal to us than Nelson-Jones."

Guqqie is quiet. Aimsey notices it slower than he'd like. Guqqie's fidgeting has stopped and they're standing completely still.

"Guqqie?"

"Theseus."

"What?" Sniff says, "Theseus hasn't been seen in months you dumb—"

"He's still a powerful figure," Guqqie says, "we say Theseus was arrested."

"So… people think Tubbo is Theseus?"

"Maybe," Guqqie says, "or that will just send a complete barrage of people going towards the heroes tower. It's a threat— I can leak it to a student group. We eventually get into contact with Nelson-Jones and tell them to let Tubbo go."

“Then they know Tubbo will be involved with Anemoi,” Aimsey says, “I’m assuming that’s the name we’d threaten them with.”

“We get him out of the country,” Sniff adds, “no matter what happens here it’s not safe for Tubbo. He needs to be gone.”

“Well they can’t have extradition with us,” Aimsey says.

“Ireland doesn’t have extradition with L’Manberg,” Guqqie says, “I have people there who would look after a sad teenage boy, my Ma would love him.”

“Fuck,” is what Sniff says, “we’re going to lose our best computer guy.”

“Is *that* your concern?” Ranboo throws both arms up in the air, “that’s my best friend in jail and we’re discussing how we’re losing a valuable asset.”

“Fuck.” Aimsey says. They half collapse onto the seat they’re sitting on, leaning back and covering their face with both hands, “this is… not good. That’s the honesty of it all, it’s really fucking not good!”

Sniff sits down on the floor, and they start looking at the floor like somehow it’s personally wronged him. “I still have connections with Elysium,” they say very, very quietly and everyone looks at them.

“What?” Ranboo is the one who manages to talk first.

“Elysium could handle this,” Sniff says, “they’d— they’d get him out.”

“Then he’d be indebted to them,” Guqqie returns, “isn’t the whole point of us to show that maybe Elysium is a little fucked up.”

“We need Tubbo out,” Ranboo returns.

“Do we?” Sniff asks, “because the only way we’re going to manage this is if like… we give up our morals, important information or we send— basically a riot towards the hero tower. We’re not… running with a bunch of options right now.”

Ranboo takes a deep breath, “let me— make a call.”

“A call?” Aimsey repeats, “who the fuck are you calling—”

“Vigilante friend,” Ranboo explains, “Purpled. If anyone knows anything, it’s going to be him. He has connections to almost every part of L’Manberg. Heroes, vigilantes, probably villains and Elysium.”

“He has connections to Elysium?” Sniff starts.

Ranboo just gives Sniff a look.

Sniff shuts up.

Aimsey massages the side of their temples. This is not good. Aimsey is aware that this is not good, xe is aware that everything has gone to shit and they're so fucked and fuck they're fucked and *Tubbo* —

This isn't good. This is so not good.

Ranboo steps out of the room, phone tucked between their cheek and shoulder.

"We could look at the information," Guqqie adds, so, so quietly.

Sniff and Aimsey's eyes snap over to them.

"Huh?"

"We can better work with blackmail if we know what we're working with," Guqqie explains, "that's like the first… rule of anything."

"So… use the USB?" Aimsey says slowly.

Guqqie nods.

Aimsey's eyes flick over to Sniff who just nods slowly.

Aimsey slowly pushes off, the rolling chair rumbling against the ground as he spins over until he's sitting at the desk with the USB sitting on it. It feels less like a USB and more like a death sentence.

But they pick it up and plug it into the computer, trying to keep their breathing even.

Aimsey holds their breath— they're not really sure why, they do though and they lean forwards staring at the computer in front of them. Several files immediately pop up, files and folders and other things that blur in front of Aimsey's face.

PDFs and pictures of papers and PNGs, but there are *thousands* of items, it will take days to get through everything, to sort everything— it really seems that whatever Nelson-Jones was hiding on his computer he really did not think about sorting it.

Which is kind of rude, no one ever talks about how *boring* finding out fraud is.

Sniff peers over Aimsey's shoulders, eyes on the screen in front of them. Sniff turns their head to the side just a little bit.

Guqqie is up out of her chair, leaning over Aimsey to see the screen better, chin almost touching Aimsey's shoulder.

"So?" Sniff says, "what do we have?"

"I don't… know," Aimsey says carefully, "a lot of files— not a lot of sorting."

"This being sorted would be lovely," Sniff mutters under her breath, "what's that one?"

They point to a random point on the screen and Aimsey clicks on it.

It's a PNG of what looks like a piece of paper, the image expands on the screen seeing what seems to be a cheque of some kind. Aimsey tilts their head to the side a little bit.

She knows the account is not one from here, she can also see in neat little letters the words *Baghera Jones* as the recipient, with a clear sign off from *William David Nelson-Jones,* which of course his fucking middle name is David.

And there's two and a half million dollars being transferred.

The moment Guqqie and Sniff see the amount of money being moved is clear, Guqqie audibly makes a noise in the back of her throat and Sniff makes a 'ghawt?' noise as they stumble back slightly.

"That's… that's two and a half million dollars, right?"

"Yup," is all Aimsey can say.

"Who the fuck is Baghera Jones?" Aimsey asks, "I've never heard that name in my life."

"Excuse me?" Guqqie scrambles forwards, looking over Aimsey's shoulder and staring at the PNG they have open, "that would've been… about ten years ago right?"

"Yeah… what happened ten years ago?" Aimsey asks, "Guqqie didn't live here… Sniff, do you know anything?"

"Nah," Sniff moves so they're looking over Aimsey's other shoulder, "Uh— I'm really not sure."

Guqqie moves back, picking up her phone, "searches for Baghera Jones isn't getting anything helpful, unless we're looking for… someone in LinkedIn who is a primary school teacher in Texas."

"I mean… maybe?" Aimsey squints at the image of the cheque displayed in front of them, why was this cheque important enough that it's a file on this computer? This has to be incriminating… surely, "I don't get it."

"Neither," Sniff huffs, "that's so much money. Why?"

"Maybe a hit job?" Guqqie provides, "maybe this Baghera person was hired to kill someone?"

"Who though?"

"I don't fucking know!" Guqqie throws their arms in the air, "I have no fucking clue, lots of people die every day it wouldn't be a shock if one of those people were just like… I don't know, just forgotten."

“I mean ten years ago was the November 16th Apartment collapse,” Sniff says, “I think? The times don’t really line up though… this was in January twenty-twelve, that’s too late.”

January 17th 2012 , the date stares back at them, trying to invite literally any answers and instead invites none. Almost ten years ago.

“What if we find her?” Guqqie asks.

Aimsey’s eyes snap over to her.

“Find her?”

“Yeah,” Guqqie says, like that is going to be an easy task to do in any capacity, “we find her and just ask.”

“She might be a hit person,” Sniff says.

“Two of you are hero trainees. If you can not take a hit person I feel like that’s very much on you.”

Aimsey and Sniff just stare at her.

“Sniff you have bone manipulation, Aimsey you have energy manipulation *surely* you can take one maybe hit person between you. We don’t even know if she is a hit person maybe she just helped with marketing or something I don’t fucking know.”

Aimsey sighs, “so our plans right now are… find Baghera Jones, get Elysium to get Tubbo out of trouble or tell everyone Theseus has been captured so we can cause enough chaos to get people disillusioned with the hero committee that we can drop the scandals and have them work on the population.”

The silence speaks more than volumes.

“… let’s try to find Jones.”

Purpled steps over the pile of blood trailing onto the floor, his mask is firmly attached to his face. His hood is up and his hoodie has a blood stain splattered across the front of it. He ignores the person whimpering on the ground.

They’re like fine.

Purpled even called them an ambulance.

He wipes his knife on his pant leg just for good measure, he already needs to wash the shit out of this hoodie— the pants aren’t really the concern. Purpled should really get some new hoodies that he can cycle through at this point.

With not that much difficulty he steps out of the alleyway, before starting to pull himself up onto a building. It’s not easy, and Purpled knows that if he falls he will die— he didn’t go to

the Theseus or Aimsey school of powers.

Everything always feels a little more dangerous for him and he likes it that way.

As his hands catch the edge of the building there's a buzzing in his back pocket.

He knows that it's a terrible idea to take his phone with him on jobs— he is also aware that his phone is probably one of the most secure devices in L'Manberg and trying to triangulate his position is *not* something that is easy.

He's glad Tubbo has done one good thing in his life.

Purpled pulls himself up onto the building, rolling over the edge of it similarly to how a seal might do— well, literally anything. For a second he just lays flat on his back on the building, staring up at the sky.

It's still day, and Purpled needs to move from this location before the police come and investigate the man he just stabbed— they'll probably establish a perimeter if they haven't already.

He knows he has to move.

But… everything is a bit tiring. It's tiring doing other people's dirty work for them, it's tiring having to clean out bloodstains. It's tiring having Tommy as a roommate.

Instead of moving he grabs his phone.

Purpled stares at the notification on his phone—

It's just an address with a '-Ranboo' signed at the end of it— Purpled has Ranboo's number so whoever is sending this at least has Ranboo's phone. For a moment Purpled spins his phone around in his hand.

It could be a trap.

It could also… not?

Purpled pulls his hood back up over his head and staggers up onto his feet. He is aware he will be arriving at— wherever this is— with blood splattered all across him. If it *is* a trap that might be an advantage.

He gives Tommy's message a thumbs up.

The way to the address is not hard, darting across buildings and jumping through gaps until he's on the edge of Lower L'Manberg, bordering on both Kinoko and Logstedchire. Schlatt's place it seems.

He drops down onto the ground next to the side of the house.

For a long moment he just stands outside, he can hear light chatter inside. Chatter is a bit strong— it seems like frantic discussions had quietly to make sure no one can hear. He can pick out bits and pieces of voices, Ranboo's, Aimsey's, Sniff's and the voice of someone he doesn't recognise at all.

If it's a trap it's a well thought out one, and Purpled can't even be mad if he dies because of this.

Purpled opens the window as quietly as he can, it's a slow process and nowhere near as fun as it looks like in movies. He uses his shoulder to slowly push the window open, pausing every few centimetres to make sure no one hears him.

Eventually he's able to slide in.

He's in what looks like some sort of living room, there's no one in here, it's just him.

Purpled slowly moves closer towards the voices, he checks that his mask is on his face for the billionth time. Aimsey is probably close to figuring out that Daniel Greyson and Purpled are the same person, but he doesn't want to expedite that process.

"—arrested?" the voice he doesn't recognise says.

"We are not leaving him," is Aimsey's response.

Right. Okay.

"Valuable information…" there's shuffling and mumbling and Purpled strains to try and hear anything, "first. Don't have a plan— do with information."

That's when Purpled approaches the door, which he slowly opens. His other hand hovers by his gun, just in case.

He is met with someone screaming and a pencil being thrown at him as he opens the door.

Aimsey is clinging onto a woman that Purpled doesn't recognise with darker pink hair, Sniff has another pencil in hand, ready to throw and Ranboo looks slightly done with the entire situation unfolding in front of him.

"We need your help," Ranboo explains, "um— our friend Tubbo has been arrested. We currently have some information with some holes in it but… that's about it."

"Who's that?" Purpled gestures at the girl with pink hair.

"Guqqie," the girl, Guqqie, says.

Right. Helpful.

"What do you need from me?"

Ranboo tilts their head in the direction of a computer. This room is filled with computers that honestly have a ludicrous amount of screens.

Purpled sighs, sitting down at the chair.

In front of him seems to be a cheque.

Really?

Purpled huffs, people these days are useless. He spins around in the chair to face the others. “It’s an offshore account, it’s been given an IBAN so you can trace it to the country the bank account was in and the bank it was with.”

“Then what?” Ranboo asks.

Purpled glances at him, “I don’t fucking know! I’m not the hacking guy, I know about banks. I don’t know how to track people, that’s never been a thing I’ve done. Who are you even looking for?”

“Some person named Baghera,” Aimsey explains, “they were wired two and a half million dollars nine years ago.”

Fucking Baghera?

Purpled for a moment has to bite down the bark of laughter that tries to rip itself out of him, instead he turns to look at Aimsey with wide eyes, it’s not even like she can see his eyes, he has the mask on.

But still.

Baghera?

“I— *Baghera* ?”

He flicks back around to the computer in front of him, sure enough her name is on the cheque and Purpled has *no* fucking clue how he missed that.

“You know her?”

“Uh… not really?” because it’s a complex question that Purpled doesn’t even know how to start unpacking.

“Do you know how to find her?”

Purpled, looking up at the ceiling, he crosses his arms and leans back in the desk chair. No. Purpled doesn’t know *exactly* how to find Baghera, Baghera was one of those people who it was best if you didn’t find, they went off the grid about five years ago.

It’s not that he doesn’t believe Baghera is still working in some sort of capacity— smuggling or selling weapons or something else that’s making money. It’s not that Purpled doesn’t

believe he *couldn't* find Baghera, it's just…

"Why do you need to find her?" Purpled asks.

"We think she might have information that could help us get Nelson-Jones kicked out of his job, ideally take down the hero committee entirely."

Purpled bangs his head on the table.

It feels suiting enough.

Several people cry out as he does it, and Purpled sits back up.

"Fine," Purpled says.

"What?"

"Fine, I'll go to Slime."

"Who the fuck is Baghera Jones?" if looks could kill, Guqqie would probably have Purpled killed right now, "tell us something you useless cun—"

"Guqqie!" Sniff snaps.

Guqqie shuts her mouth.

Purpled sighs, a long, tired sigh, because he is tired. This is a sigh worthy situation, "Baghera Jones was one of the most prominent weapons dealers in L'Manberg, she focused on Logstedchire mostly. She was the person who supplied a lot of vigilantes weapons before the crackdowns on vigilantes."

"When did they start cracking down on vigilantes?"

"A bit before Phantom died," Purpled crosses his arms, "I mean they were doing it before but that was the final… nail in the coffin so to speak. I think that was like nine years ago… maybe ten? I don't know, dates are weird, time is a weird soup."

"So… she knows a lot about vigilantes?" Aimsey says.

"Mhm."

"Hm," is what Aimsey provides.

"I don't know how to find her exactly," Purpled says, "I don't know if she's even working anymore. She probably is but… she's most likely using a fake name by now, and I wouldn't be shocked if she were working for fucking Elysium. I'd have to go to Slime."

"Slime?" Aimsey repeats, "he's been out of the game for months—"

"He very much has not," Purpled snorts, "he came back around when Theseus left. He's been involved in the protests mostly— that's kinda what all of us have been doing recently. Slime

used to work with her way back, I can't promise he knows anything but right now he is my best lead on where in the world Baghera Jones may have gone. He still sold Jones's weapons after she left, they're pretty good prices actually."

"So… Baghera was a weapons dealer back then?" Guqqie asks.

"Yeah, then it was Business Bay, then it went to the Sapphire Soldiers, then Slime and then Elysium" Purpled says slowly, "he disappeared so people, including me, buy them off Elysium now."

"You buy weapons off Elysium now?" Sniff asks, voice flat.

"Good rates," Purpled murmurs, "even better weapons."

"Purpled."

"Oh come off it," Purpled turns around to fully look at Sniff, "yes I work with and against the enemy— not all of us are Theseus who can so bravely say their moral statements then disappear from the face of the Earth without worrying about the consequences of— I don't know— hurting several heroes and siding with an organisation that keeps fucking killing people? Some of us don't get that privilege and have to work all sides."

And the thing is— Ranboo and Purpled both know who Theseus is. Ranboo made Tommy's first scrappy Theseus costume. Which means that Ranboo's face is doing something very complicated

"You don't like Theseus?" Ranboo asks quietly, and they both know what he's really asking.

"Theseus himself is just fine— he didn't think about the consequences everyone else would have to deal with," Purpled manages, he turns away from the group and crouches back over the computer, chewing on his bottom lip.

Ranboo is quiet.

"I don't…" Purpled sighs, "I don't *know* if I can find her. Even if I can, I don't know if her information is helpful. I have better connections in Elysium."

"You have connections in Elysium?" Sniff asks, voice angry.

That's not even worthy of dignifying with a response.

"Look," Purpled turns back around in the chair to look at the small group, "for lack of a better word, Tubbo's a dead guy, cut your fucking losses while you still have something to lose."

He really should have expected Aimsey swinging at him for that, because they do and the crack as they meet the plastic of the mask is noticeable. Purpled immediately rolls off the side of the chair, hand darting to the gun on his side which he points directly at Aimsey's chest.

The room goes quiet.

Sniff's hands are held out in front of them, ready to do whatever sort of bone power fuckery she does. Aimsey's are too, a weave of red darting between his fingers. Ranboo's brow is furrowed but otherwise he's just standing with his hands behind his back. Guqqie picks up a pencil holder to throw at him.

"Try it," Sniff snarls.

"I really do not want to," Purpled keeps his gun trained on Aimsey's chest, "if you want to lead this rebellion, whatever you lot want to achieve with this… you need to stop letting your emotions get in the way of what you're trying to do. This plan continues with or without Tubbo, this plan can not continue if you get yourself killed trying to get him out of whatever situation he put himself in."

Aimsey just stares at him, the hatred on their face is clear.

Purpled can't really bring himself to care anymore.

"I'll talk to Slime. I might even talk to Elysium if you want, I am not risking my neck anymore than that for someone who by all accounts is probably dead."

"You don't know that!"

"And you don't know if he's alive," Purpled snaps right back, "you can talk to Elysium, you can try and stage an escape or try and manipulate Nelson-Jones into giving Tubbo back. You have swaths of information to filter through from that USB that he may have given his life to give to you. You are not allowed to squander the chance given to you to save one person."

Aimsey just stares at him, eyes brimming with tears, "we are *not* giving up on him."

Purpled laughs.

He slides his gun back to the holster on his leg. He adjusts his mask.

And like that he leaves, slamming the door shut behind him.

Tubbo is probably dead, it's not like the entire fucking world needs to stop because one dickhead is dead. That dickhead may have died to give the USB to— whatever ragtag group these people are.

Fred sometimes… really… *truly* wonders what he's done to deserve his life. It's not like he's a particularly innocent guy, he knows working for William Nelson-Jones is as good as signing his soul away, he knows this.

He also knows that the benefits at this job are pretty good, and they mean he can pay off his university loans quicker because of some deal with the government that Fred doesn't want to think about too hard.

Is it extortion?

Maybe.

Does he care?

A little bit, but not enough to quit.

He tugs the printing he got closer to his chest. As much as he doesn't like carting printing around, it gives him something to do away from the office. It gives him time to think, and while Fred doesn't like thinking too hard, he can recognise that all this thinking is good for him.

Then lost in his train of thought, Fred promptly runs into someone.

He yelps as he tries to catch his papers mid-air, failing spectacularly at all of it.

Then he looks at who he ran into, apologies already on his tongue when— he suddenly forgets everything he was going to say.

Fred wouldn't say he's particularly strong, but he just stares at the hero towering over him.

Sam Warren is incredibly tall, he still has the mask that's become associated with him wrapped around the bottom of his face. Green hair falling into his face with the familiar green scales and patches of skin that Fred has become increasingly familiar with over the past few weeks.

"Fred, is it?" Sam says to him like Sam and him are even remotely friends. They have not talked even once.

A hand grips Fred's arm and Fred stops mid-step.

"I need you to help me with something," Sam says.

"Uh— I might need to defer you to my department head," Fred manages.

"No… no," Sam looks over his shoulder, "I think you're perfect for the job."

Fred just blinks at Sam a few times, he very much does not work for Sam. He works for Nelson-Jones and he's good at his job, and he knows that Nelson-Jones and Sam are close but he's pretty sure the contract he signed doesn't mention anything about working for other people.

Sam glances over his shoulder again before moving closer in, "have you had enough of Theseus?"

And like— Fred *has* because Theseus is more trouble than he's worth but also he hasn't been seen in months.

Fred opens his mouth to say something, literally anything but all that comes out is a breath of air. He takes a step away before Sam's hand latches around his arm.

“I wouldn’t suppose you know how much blue it takes to kill someone?” Sam says.

Due to the fact that Fred grew up in Upper L’Manberg and that… never came up, no. So he shakes his head, eyes darting back to the hand gripping around his arm.

“Twenty millilitres, that’s about how much is in a standard needle.”

Fred just stares at him.

“That will release a lethal amount of adrenaline and other fun hormones that will kill you. It’ll stop your heart. This is Type Two of course, Type One Blue can just give someone a fun time even in these amounts.”

“I— I don’t understand,” Fred says.

Sam reaches to his side, pulling out two needles.

In the needles are a shimmering, near glowing, blue liquid. There are flecks of what looks like gold in it too, and Fred can’t help but stare at it— it’s entrancing the way water on a beach is.

“We’re going to kill Theseus,” Sam presses the needle into Fred’s hand, a grin on his face so wild that Fred half thinks that Sam’s face is going to split down the middle, “and you’re going to be praised as one of the people who finally took matters into their own hands.”

“Is this… allowed—”

Sam smiles, “of course it is. We have plenty of people working on similar things right now… we’re going to do what must be done.”

Fred stares at the needle in his hand. It’s not that he thinks he’s a good person, it’s not that he even thinks he’s a bad person— it’s that he knows the longer Theseus is alive the more protests there will be. If Theseus dies now… this entire thing fades out, it’ll just be like Theseus went missing and…

Things will have order again.

He clenches the needle in his hand, eyes looking up at Sam Warren.

“Tell me what I have to do…”

To say Tommy has been stressed about Tubbo is probably a bit of an understatement. It started with Tubbo not responding to his messages— Tommy knows their relationship has been a little bit rocky.

There’s a reason they don’t live together anymore, there’s a reason that when Tommy thinks of his best friend where there used to be Tubbo there is instead Purpled. But… still, Tommy cares about his friend.

So the silence is unnerving.

Even when Tommy sends a *really* good meme, just nothing— then when Tubbo's profile starts saying he hasn't been online in 24+ hours, that's when Tommy starts getting even more worried because that's one thing Tubbo and him have always shared—

They're chronically online.

Then Techno is really busy with work, but it's the weekend so Tommy doesn't go into work because he quite enjoys his work-life boundaries. Being a PR manager is not easy— especially when Phil decides he's going to try and win in a fight with a seagull and he gets his fucking ass kicked.

Tommy truly, really, really needs a fucking raise.

So Tommy is just— hanging about his apartment. He's trying not to chew his nails off with stress. Currently he still has fingernails so it's going okay. Then he starts the pacing in his Pacing Spot™ and he can feel the spots in the carpet where his feet have worn down the fabric to not much more than a knub.

Every few seconds he checks his phone— just in case— maybe Tubbo got wrapped up in a project? He does that. It's not like Tubbo *isn't* allowed to fall off the face of the Earth for a few days… Tubbo is allowed to do that.

It's just he's never done it before.

Even when Tommy and Tubbo weren't talking— Tommy still had Tubbo on social media and could check to make sure Tubbo was alive.

But Tubbo's one stubborn bastard— he wouldn't just go *dying* on someone.

Right?

Right?

When there's a knock at the door Tommy jumps so hard that he picks up the first item next to him and points it at the door— then he realises that he has actual friends who come to visit him and is going to attack them with a…

He's grabbed one of those fidget toy slugs.

With a sigh he throws it back onto the table and walks to the door before swinging it open.

Techno's standing there.

"Oh, hey Tech," Tommy says, "I thought you were working tonight—"

Techno pushes past him— which is rude— but a pretty standard Techno thing to do. He walks into Tommy's apartment.

Then Techno is standing in the middle of Tommy's apartment and for once he looks like he doesn't quite fit.

Techno's gone to this apartment— hundreds of times at this point, but now he's standing in the apartment like he's never really belonged there. He fidgets, hands wringing around themselves as he opens and closes his mouth.

"Who died?" Tommy can't help but ask.

Techno's hesitation is enough to make Tommy's stomach drop.

"Where's Purpled—"

"He's fine, he's fine," Techno waves a hand, that doesn't stop the pinched expression he has though, "it's Tubbo. He's been arrested and we can't find where they've put him."

"What?"

"I said— we can't find the institution they put him in."

"I heard that, dickhead. The fuck do you mean they arrested Tubbo?"

Techno takes a deep breath, for a moment he just looks out of the tiny window in the lounge room, "he was found breaking into William Nelson-Jones's office by a low level employee named Fred. Fred called the alarm and then Aimsey and I responded to the scene. We arrested him."

"You arrested Tubbo?" Tommy can't help but yell, "you both arrested Tubbo?"

"The fuck was I supposed to do?" Techno shoots back, "Sam was there and I couldn't just not arrest someone who broke into Nelson-Jones's office."

"There's always a third option."

"Well forgive me for being a little bit hasty with my decision," Techno's teeth are gritted, and Tommy knows he's mad but he also knows that Techno tends to be more mad about situations than at Tommy himself.

"Well— we have to do something," Tommy starts pacing, the familiar worn out pieces of carpet underneath his feet, "we can't just not—"

"Tommy, we don't know where he is," Techno stresses, "I can't exactly plan a breakout if we don't know where to find the kid."

"They can't just—" Tommy flails his hands around a little bit, "how do you not know where he is?"

"They haven't put any names in any files from any resources that Aimsey and I have access too— I'm going to ask Reddings just in case, maybe ask Purpled— that kid has connections all over the city."

“You’re going to ask Elysium for their help?” Tommy deadpans, “seriously—”

“Do you have literally any other option, Thomas? I’m open to hearing it.”

“Purpled!”

“He’s still just a kid— he might just end up going to Reddings Street and finding Elysium there. I don’t want him going to Reddings and Elysium by himself.”

“He can handle himself,” Tommy returns, “he’s not fucking stupid— he knows how to handle spaces like that. It’s just a glorified gang hideout, Purpled’s broken into those plenty of times. He also might have connections that we don’t know about!”

Techno sighs, “you two are not fucking invincible.”

“Do not act like we’re weak.”

“I’m not saying that you dense fuck!” Techno yells, he pauses and takes a deep breath, “sorry — I would not feel *good* about handing this to Purpled, I’m trying my connections and methods, then if need be I’ll go to him.”

Tommy opens his mouth again but Techno just raises his hand in a ‘shut the fuck up’ motion, which indeed makes Tommy shut the fuck up, it’s impressive actually.

“We can’t get him out of this.”

“What?”

Techno, with a deep sigh, runs a hand down his face. “I know Tubbo is your friend but— I can’t… we can’t get him out of this. If it was almost anyone else then maybe— but it’s William Nelson-Jones.”

“But—”

“No,” Techno says, “you are not risking your safety— something you’ve worked very hard for, by the way, to just… throw that all away because Tubbo’s in danger. He wouldn’t want that for you— we can work on it but…”

“What?” Tommy snaps, “I just need to accept that he’s gonna be in jail forever, he’s not my best friend but that doesn’t mean I don’t care about him. If we could talk to him— figure out what he was doing, we could come to some sort of agreement, surely?”

Techno just looks at him, expression flat.

Tommy looks down at his hand.

Tommy’s powers have been a complicated thing in the two and a half months he hasn’t been Theseus for. That familiar buzz at the back of his brain— that familiar whirl that’s followed him around since he was a young child, it’s quiet.

His head being quiet is a new thing, the first month was almost unbearable.

He hasn't tried to use his powers in… so long.

But… Tubbo is in jail.

Theseus can tear the world apart if he needs to. Tommy knows that. Techno knows that. It seems that everyone around him knows that Theseus is… a destructive, ugly force, and maybe with all the wrong that Tommy committed *as* Theseus he can… make up for some of that.

God. He wants to make up for everything he did.

Tommy looks down at his hand.

Sparks.

He could do that easily, without even thinking.

He tries to form sparks in his hand, he tries to visualise it, the small sparks darting off his hands, he tries to form the energy there by thinking about it. He used to be able to do that, he used to be able to throw cars by tilting his head.

For good measure he tilts his head.

And… his powers don't work anymore. What's changed? Tommy got scared of his powers— and…

That cuff.

The power suppressing cuff.

"Hey… Tech," Tommy looks up from his hands, "my… my powers got stronger after the warehouse, right?"

Techno nods.

"And… they stopped when that cuff was put on me. Right?"

Techno glances to the side, before nodding once again.

"Oh, fuck," Tommy's vision blurs and his legs seem to shake underneath him.

Techno immediately rushes forwards, catching him with ease and keeping Tommy standing upright. Tommy is still shaking, he stares at Techno with wide eyes— his breath isn't coming easily, it feels like someone has closed his windpipe and his lungs are collapsing in on themselves.

Fuck.

It makes sense too—

“Tommy?” Techno’s voice is a bit hazy— almost like everything happening is a dream, Tommy’s eyes won’t focus on his face. “Kid? What’s wrong— talk to me. Words are good, you’ve been working on using your words.”

“I’m gonna throw up,” Tommy murmurs.

And Tommy does.

Right on Techno’s shoes.

It is safe to say, Techno is… incredibly unimpressed.

Tubbo never really particularly fancied the idea of prison. It just isn’t quite his speed. Despite that, Tubbo finds himself sitting against the wall of what for better or worse was a prison. He sighs, whacking his head against the wall, not to hurt, just to… have something to do.

The thing is right now he has to rely on other people out there, Schlatt might be able to pay his bail. Tommy might be able to pull some strings, (not like he would.) Aimsey might manage to do something or… Tubbo is just destined to sit here forever.

It’s a holding cell at least, he’s sure a trial is being set and it’ll become some sort of media spectacle. He thinks Schlatt can pull something off— he will not be impressed with Tubbo at all, but Tubbo will be impressed with Tubbo so…

He sighs, again, shuffling down so he’s laying on his back staring up at the ceiling.

The chances of him going to Pandora are… high at best, certain. What the fuck is he even supposed to do apart from wait? He did the morally right thing and look at where that got him — he should’ve run off to Canada with Ranboo.

Maybe after this he will.

If there even is an after this.

He keeps his eyes on the ceiling. It’s not all that bad— he’s being fed? That’s a lie. The food is shitty as hell.

Then there’s a noise outside, Tubbo pops up, staring at the door for a few seconds. Then the door slides open and light floods the room. He looks up at the figure in the doorway, he knows it’s not anyone he recognises.

Not Schlatt, not Aimsey, not even Ranboo. In fact, Tubbo would even feel better about seeing Techno’s face right about now.

As Tubbo’s eyes focus he’s able to see more. In front of him is a balding man— now balding in itself is fine it’s a natural thing that happens. What the funny part is, is that this man seems to be wildly denying that he’s balding and in an attempt to look less stupid, he looks even more stupid.

He's wearing some business casual clothes, with a tie and slacks and stupid fucking shoes along with a tie that Tubbo would like to strangle either him. Tubbo has seen the news enough to know who this is.

William Nelson-Jones.

Everyone hates him. It's as clear as that. Tubbo isn't sure anything positive has ever been said about this man— Tubbo's also pretty sure he has kids. Or a kid. Something came up when Tubbo was snooping around for public information but he can't remember it right now.

"Morning."

"It's evening actually," the man responds, he adjusts the cuffs on the sleeves of his stupid fucking suit that does not fit him at all.

"Oh, I'm sorry— I would be able to tell if I had a window, or any way to tell the time, or any routine that I had been made aware of. Next time I'll simply just tell the fucking time with my mind."

Something about what Tubbo is actually saying manages to make William Nelson-Jones pause. Which is fair, Tubbo did say something pretty out of pocket. He looks at Tubbo for a few moments, pure… curiosity in his eyes.

Tubbo yawns, "you want something?"

"Quite a few things actually Tobias."

And now Tubbo is supposed to act shocked and surprised that this man knows his name. Which first of all— a completely absurd thing to be shocked by, a committed fifth grader could find out his name, and Tubbo's motherfucker of a father works with William.

"Woahhhh," Tubbo lays back down at the floor, looking up at the ceiling, propping one of his arms behind his head, "you know my name! So do half of the criminal underworld of L'Manberg join the fucking club buddy, do you actually want something or—"

"I would like to know the whereabouts of the information you collected from my office."

Tubbo turns his head to look at the man. He's sideways because Tubbo is still laying down, he actually looks like he expects some sort of fucking answer from Tubbo. Tubbo rolls his eyes and goes back to looking at the ceiling.

Fucking… old people and their audacity.

Yeah… because Tubbo's just going to go *'hey old dude who I'm trying to take down, have all the information I can use to do that because you asked so.'*

"I would recommend you tell me, Tobias."

"That's gonna get real fucking old."

“I know you have plenty of loved ones.”

And here’s the thing. Tubbo does. Tubbo always will, he’ll always care about Ranboo and Tommy and sometimes Purpled on a good day. He’ll care about Aimsey and Sniff and Guqqie and he’ll care about the random people from his classes that he’s made friendships with. The other thing is…

They can look after themselves.

They’re either already criminals or close enough friends with heroes that they’re as good as safe. He has loved ones, he knows that— he appreciates that, he knows they’re trying to get him out wherever he is.

Just… he doesn’t give a shit.

In fact, Tubbo would pay money to try and have William Nelson-Jones kill Tommy, Tommy had taken on worse odds before and come out fine. He hadn’t… been a vigilante for three years and just— not learnt how to take care of himself.

Ranboo can literally teleport away.

Aimsey and Sniff are literal heroes.

Schlatt is so deeply involved in the crime network around L’Manberg that if someone looks at him wrong he can probably have them disappear.

And… Tubbo realises, with almost a giddy feeling in his chest.

There is nothing that William Nelson-Jones can do to him. Tubbo could die, he could be locked away forever or he could just… never see the light of day again. But William Nelson-Jones will fall, his friends have all the information.

Slowly, he sits up.

He fights to keep the bubbling laughter inside of him.

This motherfucker can’t do shit— if he retaliates against someone Tubbo loves then Nelson-Jones will probably fucking die and then Tubbo’s goal is also achieved.

Tubbo just laughs, “all my friends have protection from you, you idiot,” he leans back against the wall, closing his eyes. “There’s more forces at play than just you. You can do whatever the fuck you want to me, the information will be out there, you will fall.”

Nelson-Jones frowns.

Tubbo just laughs, looking up at the ceiling as he does so before his eyes land back down on Nelson-Jones. “You… are so fucking stupid,” Tubbo almost cackles, he holds his stomach as he does so, “you really fucking thought— you could—” he breaks out into laughter again, folding over as he laughs.

It takes… a hot second for Tubbo to stop laughing.

He's still grinning, trying not to chuckle when he looks up at William Nelson-Jones again.

"Nothing you do to me is going to matter you fucking idiot," Tubbo tilts his head a little, "I can die. That won't matter. The first signs are coming, Theseus— all your heroes hate you, Elysium is doing more social welfare in Logstedchire than you'd care to admit. The people working for you are only doing it out of fear—"

"And what do you know, Tubbo? Tobias Reeves?"

Tubbo snorts, "I know that name has no power over me anymore, I know my father will be convicted of crimes from merely being *around* the hero committee. I know that soon everything will catch up to you again— and there will be another Technoblade, trying to kill a politician. But the next one won't miss. And the world will be so, so much better off for it, and you'll rot in hell."

He fights the bubbling laughter down from his chest.

"You know what I know?" Tubbo leans forwards, "you got your position decades ago and have clung onto it with your slowly rotting hands. Your fingernails have dug into the table and you're clinging on to power. But you can see it slipping can't you? You can see everything you tried to create and uphold start to slip away. Because of Theseus, because of Elysium, because the heroes hate you."

To his credit, William Nelson-Jones's face doesn't even change.

"I also know that when you die, not a single person will mourn you. You will probably die at the hands of your own heroes that you put in place to uphold your power. To be honest I hope it's Technoblade on the other end of the weapon that finally puts you down like the sick animal you fucking are."

Tubbo sees fear flicker in Nelson-Jones's eyes.

He doesn't say anything to Tubbo, he just turns to the guard by the door. "Make arrangements to move this one to Pandora's."

He walks out of the room.

And Tubbo can't keep the laughter from spilling out of him, whatever happens to him doesn't matter. He's done it. William Nelson-Jones might share the cell next to him soon enough, and Tubbo starts laughing even harder.

This reign of terror over L'Manberg will be ended by five gay-ass teenagers and young adults, with no particular special skills between them, just some powers and a whole lot of stubbornness and fucking spite.

Tubbo laughs harder.

Purpled finds Slime that night easily enough.

The thing that makes him pause though is that he's not… all slimy, he's looking relatively human. He's a pale person with brown messy hair who's wearing just… a white t-shirt and what looks like black jeans.

Purpled can't actually see his face from back here— and in all honesty he doesn't want to. Knowing *who* vigilantes are is never good.

And if there's one rule that vigilantes can agree on— it's don't approach someone when their mask is off, literally or not. And right now Purpled is pretty sure he's intruding on something that is incredibly private.

"Hey," Purpled says.

Slime— who doesn't look like Slime jumps and goes very still.

"It's just me, Purpled," he doesn't move from his spot, in fact, he shoves his hands in his pockets and rocks back and forth on his feet, "I'm not gonna move from here until you turn around."

"Give me a second, I have to rearrange my face."

"Pardon?"

Then even from the distance Purpled is back on the building, he watches as there is a squelching noise and from a point on Slime's neck green goo seems to spread out from there. As it happens Slime goes— well— green and gooey but also slightly transparent.

There's another squelching noise, and then Slime turns around to give a short smile.

"Wait— so you don't actually look like that?"

"No," Slime laughs, "I can change what my face looks like in this form."

"That's—" probably the coolest thing Purpled has ever heard, and he can't even freak out about it because he's here on business, "woah."

Slime doesn't turn his head or anything, just staring straight ahead.

"You alright, man?" Purpled asks, trying to keep his voice as light as possible, "sitting on a roof in your civilian form normally means your life has gone to fucking shit."

Slime laughs a little bit, "yeah— it has a little bit. It's alright though."

"Do you wanna… talk about it?"

Slime turns to look at Purpled a little more, amusement clearly on his face, "you for some reason are not givin' me a super talkative vibe, *Purpled from Logstedchire."*

“Oh fuck off with that. You only get all weird after months in the slime form.”

Slime rolls his eyes.

“Do you know Baghera Jones?” Purpled asks.

The expression that flashes on Slime’s face, rearranged and whatever it is really says it all. Slime’s head snaps around so he’s looking directly at Purpled and Purpled looks away before they make eye contact.

“I— how do you know that name?”

Purpled shrugs, “you know her?”

Slime blinks a few times before running a hand down his face, “uh— yeah, we knew each other. Back when I was your age.”

“You were my age?”

“Most people were your age at some point, Purpled,” Slime responds easily, “why do you want to know about Baghera.”

“I need to find her.”

“Why?”

“Client.”

Slime narrows his eyes, “you told me you don’t work anymore.”

“Then let’s call them friends,” Purpled sits down on the edge of the building next to Slime, arms firmly crossed, “I can’t tell you much information, it's risky… they found something in files from the committee… they want me to try and find her.”

“Would this information have anything to do with the information leak they’re reporting?”

“I dunno,” Purpled turns his head to fully look at Slime, “does it?”

Slime takes a deep breath, “we don’t talk much anymore. Last I heard from her she’d come back from France… she tends to like farmer’s markets and she has a safe house in Kinoko. I’m not sure where she’d be from that.”

“I don’t believe you.”

And Slime sighs, a tired sort of thing that builds up over a lifetime, “I’m supposed to see her in a week at the Kinoko farmer’s market… just to catch up, see how she’s doing. I think you and your friends need to see her more.”

Purpled can feel the relief flood his bones as his posture relaxes— okay, he’s done this thing. He’s essentially found Baghera Jones for them.

“Thank you, Slime. You’ve done a lot for me over these past few months… y’know with Theseus gone and… thank you.”

“It’s Charlie,” Slime says, “my name’s Charlie.”

“Purpled,” he says, “or Daniel. Most people know me as Daniel. My actual name is Purpled though— it’s confusing.”

Charlie laughs, shaking his head.

They fall into silence.

There’s a quiet noise behind them, and Purpled glances over his shoulder.

Walking towards them is Aurelian. Her outfit has changed since the last time Purpled’s seen her. She still sports her iconic black tracksuit with an absurd number of pockets, all stitched with golden thread. Now is has short sleeves, showing off parts of pale skin and arm guards she’s now wearing.

Over the top of it all is a bullet-proof vest, which is realistically something Purpled should also invest in.

Her hood is up, but if it was down it’s not like Purpled would know more about her considering how often her hair is a different colour. She still has the large gas-mask style mask that she’s donned her entire time.

Purpled relaxes his shoulders as she walks closer, “hey.”

“Hi,” she says, the voice comes out distorted and breathy as if Purpled doesn’t know who she is, and she doesn’t know who he is.

She sits down on the side of the roof next to Purpled.

“So much for the Logstedchire Four, right?” there’s amusement in her voice.

They all know why Theseus stopped, and sometimes Purpled doesn’t even blame him for it.

Charlie snorts and Purpled finds himself smiling underneath the mask.

There’s a silence that surrounds all of them, it feels mourning and suffocating and like the entire weight of the world is pressing down on Purpled’s shoulders. It aches and Purpled is so tired of the ache, but he wouldn’t put it down for anything.

So where does that leave him?

Where does that leave them?

Purpled swings his legs back and forth, “do you think it’ll change?”

“No,” Aurelian says, her eyes are trained on the streets below, looking for anything happening, “I don’t know if a society that’s been so indoctrinated into the acceptance of heroes can just… change like that.”

Purpled cranes his head back, looking up at the night sky.

There’s not stars, not really, the light pollution has long pushed them out of the sky, leaving an inky blackness that feels more like a suffocating void around.

“I think it’s already changing,” he smiles, “it’s already changed.”

“Do you reckon there’s a generation of children in Logstedchire who can live in relative peace? No vigilantes, no gangs— just a childhood that they can look back on and smile.”

Charlie’s smile turns a little bit sadder, “not yet.”

“Reckon there will be?”

“No,” Aurelian says with the tiredness that Purpled feels most days. The sort of bone-deep tiredness that comes over a lifetime of hope that’s been shattered time and time again.

“I hope so,” is what Charlie says.

“You’re still hopeful, Slime?” Aurelian laughs.

“It’s changed so much since I was a kid, I don’t see why it can’t change more.”

And Purpled can’t think of much to answer, so tips his head up to look at the void above them that used to be a bright night sky before lights and people and hero committees and gangs and everything awful that’s happened on these streets.

Maybe one day Purpled will be able to see these streets without wondering what bad things have happened there. He hopes there’s a day where he sees the streets of one of the districts and not a list of traumas.

Chapter End Notes

turns out i repeated the note i had on chapter 1 again here, so i've decided to change this note but idk what to talk about.

thank you for all the lovely comments on tinaaos and atlas (ILAF) over the years but especially when i announced my epic return, all of those comments were really sweet and i cried a little (a lot)

I am VERY excited about the future of tinaaos and as of (4/12/2024) i have written perhaps the most horrific thing i've ever written for this story or in general and im

excited to share. Please look at all the trigger warnings for atlas at the top of this chapter. <33

live

Chapter Summary

> “What have you done?” Tommy breathes out.
>
> Another burst of pain through his entire body and Tommy lands on his knees, he barely registers more than a dull ache as he holds his injured hand. He curls over with another burst of pain.

or, i get this show on the fucking road

Chapter Notes

> you might be asking “ellis wtf is the lore situation” and to that i say… it’s the lore from tinaaos unless i overwrite it here, then ILAF has the correct lore.
>
> (This TOTALLY completely irrelevant because I totally didn’t change the dates of important things or the names of people on the hero committee or anything about elysium /s)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the depths of what used to be a very old subway system in Logstedchire is what used to be an office. The office was mainly used by ticketing staff to get away from the demands of customers and people buying tickets who were so incompetent it was genuinely baffling.

There are still remains of this previous life the room had, a peeling poster of ticket prices that seem ludicrousy cheap now. Chipped tiles and the tattered remains of hats they wore that they didn’t know would be hung up for the last time.

Half of the tunnel is in ruin.

That’s what makes it the perfect meeting place. The tunnels were dug out years ago, when someone had the idea of an organisation that conjoined the most important power players in Logstedchire.

Unlike the old office all those decades ago, now the arguing and the incompetence happens *inside* of the office.

While there are remains of what this place used to be, equally there are new additions to the room. One is a large table plonked in the middle of the room. It was originally a round table,

but got bits cut out of it until now it looks like a very confusing octagon, nothing has equal sides and it looks a bit of a mess.

Only one person who regularly frequents this room knows it, but this table was picked up from the side of the road. It has since been cleaned and sanded and looks quite nice and perhaps even modern— but it was picked up from someone's rubbish pile outside of their house.

Expanding out from three of the four sides of this room are new entrances, which were painstakingly carved out from various points. One goes directly to Reddings Street, the other two go to various places in Logstedchire.

Six people are around the table, they're missing one today but that's become more common than isn't. One of them is standing at one of the larger ends of the table that was shoddily cut off, he's standing, ranting about cutting Redding's budget.

Again.

The feeling of trust is not one found in this room, it feels more like drowning with a group of people. Everyone can pull themselves up out of the water for a bit but only because of the other people drowning.

It's out of a need and want for survival instead of anything else.

"Most of our funds are going to Reddings, we need to move some other places—"

"Wasn't the whole point of this to fund my projects? I mean if anyone else is doing half the work I'm doing then I would be super, super happy to support them. Elysium doesn't exist without Reddings Street."

"No one is doubting the amount you've done for Elysium, Bad. I'm just saying due to us stopping the turf war in central Logstedchire and both of the gangs otherwise shutting down we don't have enough money filtering into the organisation. We used to make a shit tonne from the fighting rings and then Nestor, rightfully, put an end to those."

"Damn right."

"And it was the right thing to do, Nestor. It just means a lot of our funders are not super impressed with us right now, which then means we have way less money to work with than we did last quarter."

Someone sighs, massaging his temples, a pretty common reaction to talking about quarters and budgets on your day off.

"We can't just keep cutting Bad's budget. I actually go to Reddings Street, unlike the rest of you, and the work they do out there is our most effective tool at both recruiting and general work for the betterment of Logstedchire."

"We're not making as much money. We aren't able to cover the cost of supplying weapons to the quality that Baghera wants."

“We have enough weapons!”

“We do not!”

“I actually work with the weapons, and with the kids you’re all trying to save, by the way. We have enough weapons, we don’t need more foot soldiers— we’re doing fine as is. What we need is to invest back into the community— like Bad is doing. We are at our most effective when we have general public support, which we are going to need if we’re going to make it through whatever fuckery the Hall of Heroes attack is going to do.”

“Hannah’s right,” one of the quieter voices says, “up at the hero tower and the general media sites they’re totally gonna try and override everything after the attack on the Hall of Heroes. I feel like you need actual support in Logstedchire to ride that out.”

A hissed sigh before one of them sits in their chair, rubbing a hand against their brow “we’re making far less money— we have less money to work with than we did before.”

“Look, Deo. We all know you’re in charge for now. You’re thinking too much about the all-out war side of this, we’re not *going* to have an all-out war. This was always about making Logstedchire better, it wasn’t about— wiping out the heroes.”

“The only way we can make Logstedchire equal to other districts is if the heroes are gone to stop enforcing this system that caused these injustices in the first place.”

“Okay… but *do* you have to murder them all for that to happen because that’s kind of going to put a downer on the entire thing—”

“SHUT UP FOOLISH,” four voices snap at him at once.

“Fuckin’ jeez okay. You’re allowed to protect your interests and suddenly I’m trying to protect mine and I’m the bad guy. I get it. I get it.”

“Wiping out the heroes is not going to solve our issues,” one of the voices speak up for the first time, commanding the room towards her, “I’ve tried that— thirty-four heroes on our hands and all it did was get more people hurt. Deo… that is a path many fall into, and I’m not even sure if I can blame you for it. At the end of the day— we’ve tried that before, and it’s failed. There is no reason to believe this time is different.”

“Public perception has changed a lot since last time… Theseus alone is a sign of how… fed up everyone is with this.”

“Theseus is not the revolutionary people think he is,” and it’s said with anger and disappointment, something that the other people present in the meeting pretend not to notice.

“I know. Trust me. Nestor and I were there at Kinoko. *We know.* He’s a sign that something is changing though, whether he comes back or not it doesn’t matter. People all around L’Manberg are reconsidering what they knew, how Logstedchire is treated. We need to keep uplifting Reddings and Bad’s projects, not preparing for *war.* ”

“Just trying to wipe out the heroes feels like a waste of time in what is perhaps the most promising start we could have gotten to this. Thirty-four heroes died, Deo, and not a single thing changed. We have to try something new or we are repeating old mistakes. People are looking at us— for us to make our next move. Our next move is one of symbolism not of violence, symbolism speaks to people more than violence will.”

And Deo sighs, a deep inhale through his nose, “fine. We keep Theseus out of it.”

There’s a long pause between everyone— the feeling in the room about the effectiveness of anything they do not being underpinned by Theseus’s existence. Someone opens their mouth.

“We keep Theseus out of it.”

Tommy’s entire body is shaking.

He should be embarrassed about how much he’s shaking, but he can’t bring himself to be. His entire body is shaking, he’s shaking so badly— everything hurts, breathing hurts and Tommy can barely think.

Tommy doesn’t have his powers. He knows he doesn’t have his powers but that’s different now— it’s like when he got that fucking power suppressing cuff on him those months ago, like something he didn’t know was missing from him has just been yanked out from underneath his feet.

Everything is awful.

Worst of all… he knows *why* he doesn’t have his powers.

“Sam’s the one who… created the power suppressing cuffs right?”

“Mhm.”

“And they use like— that thing he made, it’s virtually the opposite of blue. They call it red I don’t know— but like it stops powers, right?”

“Yeah…”

“And now I can’t access my powers at all,” Tommy stares down at his hands, “but my powers… they got so much stronger after I was exposed to Blue in the warehouse— *fuck* that feels like years ago. And I know you were more exposed but—”

“What are you trying to say?” Techno keeps his hands on Tommy’s shoulders, it’s grounding and comfortable and Tommy can find himself breathing easier because of it, “breathe… you’re okay.”

So Tommy breathes.

“I— I think my powers might be powered by blue.”

Techno blinks at him once, then twice, then a third time just for good measure, “that’s literally not possible.”

“I— uh— I really think it is,” is what Tommy says instead, he looks down at his hands that are still shaking, “my powers immediately got more powerful after the warehouse… they don’t *work* anymore.”

“They don’t work?”

“No!” Tommy throws his arms up in the air, “I’ve been trying— I tried and I can’t… I can’t even do sparks.”

“You…” Techno blinks at him slowly a few times, “you seriously think your powers are powered by drugs rather than like… your genetics.”

“Explain this then!” Tommy waves his hands in Techno’s face, “I used to be able to throw people across rooms, I used to be able to throw cars by using my *eyes* , the only thing that’s changed since then has been… well… the shit Sam did. That power suppressing cuff, it worked and maybe it nullified whatever effects Blue might have had on my powers.”

Techno blinks at him a few times, “drugs stay in your system for… weeks maximum. You are very literally not making any sense.”

Tommy opens and closes his mouth, staring at his hands, “yeah… I guess.”

Techno sighs, the way someone does when asked to drive a knife through their eye. He huffs, moving forwards so he’s standing in front of Tommy. He grabs Tommy’s shoulder with one hand, and looks him in the eyes, “why do you think it’s illegal drugs powering your powers rather than yourself?”

“I explained it— because of the—”

“No,” Techno shakes his head, eyes still trained on Tommy’s.

“The fuck do you mean ‘no’?” Tommy screeches.

Tommy is aware he is panicking— that is something that he has been made aware of. He is aware he is panicking and very much feels like he is panicking because he is panicking.

Techno’s grip on his shoulder tightens— it doesn’t hurt at all, Techno would never hurt him, it more serves as a reminder, a reminder that Tommy is not allowed to run from this conversation no matter how much every cell in his body is fighting for him to leave.

“You’re not telling me something,” is what Techno says.

His voice is as even as ever, his eyes are also as gentle as ever.

Techno is so fucking gentle and Tommy wants to tear him apart because of it.

Still, it feels near like Tommy's entire world is falling apart. He opens and closes his mouth, unable to stop the tears immediately springing to his eyes. He tears his eyes away from Techno, staring a splotch of dried blood on the wall— who even knows what that's from.

Because he is. He hasn't been. He has been trying to hide something from *himself* for almost a decade now and—

Tommy is not a strong person, but there's something desperate and scrappy inside of him, there's *been* something desperate and scrappy inside of him since he's been very young. That kid, clawing to hold onto anything that would let him sink his fingernails into, still exists in his blood.

He is not a strong person, but he's desperate enough to pull away from Techno, jerking his shoulder out of Techno's grip. His hands draw up into a fighting position out of instinct— that scrappy kid in Logstedchire trying to survive still exists in him.

This time it's directed at Techno though.

Techno barely even reacts, he draws his hands back like they've been burnt and just stares at Tommy.

The two of them look at each other.

"What aren't you telling me, Tommy?"

Tommy just stares at him.

Techno's face twists into something else as he looks Tommy in the eyes again, he looks for something in Tommy's expression— and Techno is one of the few people who have even gotten close enough to be able to read *anything* on Tommy's face.

"What haven't you told anyone?"

And it feels like a crack forms in his chest— because there's so many things he hasn't told anyone, there's so many things that he's kept inside of his chest that he doesn't want to let out because of the fear it might ruin him.

Tommy just looks at Techno.

"Nothing," Tommy snaps, "why aren't you believing me? Don't you trust me?"

"That's not what this is about and you know that."

"Then just believe what I'm telling you. They're powered by blue."

Techno's entire face twists into something Tommy doesn't know how to decipher, "how do you know that Tommy? Scientifically that doesn't make any sense, you have to know that. You *have* to know that."

Tommy takes a step back, "it does."

“You know it doesn’t, unless you’re aware of some science that I haven’t been made aware of.”

He takes another step back.

Techno looks tired, that’s something Tommy’s never really taken a lot of time to look at before. Techno’s face is just his face— with the scar across his nose and the several others scattered across his face. His eyes are slowly shifting to gold, his hair dye— long faded and patchy no longer matches the colour of pink that now grows from the roots of his hair. But there’s something about the way Techno carries his shoulders that is so impossibly tired, his eyes are tired.

There’s something different about really looking at a family member, at remembering what they look like and how things are different—

He wonders what Techno sees when he looks at him, if his exhaustion is as obvious.

“Get out of my house,” Tommy says.

Techno just stares at him, mouth open, “pardon?”

“Get the fuck out of my apartment,” Tommy takes a few steps over to the door and swings it open.

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“Get the fuck out!” Tommy screams, whirling back around at Techno, “Tubbo’s arrested— who the fuck knows where Purpled is. You’re being a dick right now and you know that, get the fuck out of my house before I throw you out myself.”

They both know that Tommy couldn’t, especially without his powers.

And the worst thing is Techno doesn’t even look *mad* , he looks annoyed, for sure— but he rarely ever looks angry at Tommy. He almost looks a little bit sad.

Techno huffs as he walks towards the door, pausing for a second, “call me if you need anything. Okay?”

Tommy just looks at him.

“Or the necklace,” Techno gestures to the necklace Tommy still has hanging around his neck and has for… months at this point, “I’ll be there.”

Tommy slams the door shut.

He takes a deep breath as he stumbles slightly, back against the door as he slides down onto the floor. One hand clutching the necklaces. Techno got it for him so long ago, sometimes he forgets he’s wearing it entirely.

A shuddering breath rips itself out from his throat and he wipes at his eyes, he's not crying, not yet.

It was *so* long ago, Tommy stares at the necklace. Some sort of safety beacon he never figured out how it worked… it was for the fake Swinter they made up all of those months ago because of Australians and Christmas trees and…

Tommy leans his head back against the door, taking a deep breath.

Things weren't easier back then, pretending things were easier back then is kidding himself but Techno didn't know him as well back then, Techno couldn't just look at him and start trying to unravel all the secrets Tommy has kept to himself for years.

He has the familiar black and white rock in between his pointer finger and thumb, rolling it around uselessly, trying to calm himself down. There's nothing really calm about this clawing feeling rising in his throat.

No powers and Tubbo's in prison. No powers and Techno is starting to figure things out. No powers and Tommy doesn't know what to do anymore because it's not just like he can avoid Techno for the rest of his life.

He's never wanted this.

This isn't fair—

There's a crash and muffled swearing and Tommy's head jerks upwards.

Stumbling out of his room is one Purpled, pulling his hoodie off and throwing it across the room. His hair is stuck to his head in a way that is not flattering at all, like even a little bit, and Purpled just throws his mask and goggles across the room.

They hit the wall and land on the floor.

Purpled sighs.

Then he seems to notice Tommy, and jumps slightly, hand darting to the knife strapped onto his leg before realising that it's just Tommy.

"Oh, hey, I'm home," Purpled says.

Tommy can't be bothered to come up with a response.

Purpled nudges Tommy with his foot, "why are you being a grumpy fuck?"

"Fuck off, Purpled," Tommy mumbles.

"Stop sulking," Purpled kicks him in the leg again, "get up."

"Fuck off."

Purpled sighs, picking Tommy up by the back of his shirt and forcing him back onto his feet. Tommy screeches as he swipes uselessly at Purpled.

“Why are you being a grumpy fucker?”

“Tubbo’s in jail.”

“Yeah, he’s probably dead.”

“Don’t fucking say that!”

Purpled just rolls his eyes, letting go of the back of Tommy’s shirt and picking up his goggles and mask on the ground, “stop moping.”

“I’m not moping,” Tommy moped mopily.

Purpled glances back down at his hands, “I uh— Ranboo contacted me about Tubbo.”

“Huh?”

“There’s people, Tubbo’s new friends I’m guessing— they’re working on getting him out.”

“How— who— where?”

Purpled looks at Tommy for a few seconds before shaking his head and trudging over to the kitchen, swinging open the fridge and starting his post-patrol snacking, “let them handle it.”

“What? No, this is Tubbo. I’m not gonna just— let someone else handle it.”

“Me knowing is already a security risk,” Purpled grabs a Tupperware container of something, opening the lid and looking at it approvingly, “did Phil make more pizza scrolls? These look really good—”

“Yes he did and— stop it. What the fuck do you mean?”

Purpled shoves a pizza scroll into his mouth, nodding approvingly. He turns around to look back at Tommy. Holding the Tupperware container in one hand while using his other hand to shovel pizza scrolls into his mouth, “‘ish too hard. I shou’d’nt know. You ‘ave the s’hubtley of a brick to the face. They ‘ere also in char’ of the ‘eak in.”

Tommy blinks at Purpled a few times, “huh?”

Purpled stops shoving pizza scrolls into his mouth and puts the lid back onto the Tupperware container, “telling them about you would be too hard. You’re as subtle as a brick to the face. They were the people behind the tower security breach like two days ago.”

“WHAT?”

In response, Purpled puts the container back in the fridge and grabs a yoghurt, “you’re too volatile you’d fuck up their plans.”

And yeah— Purpled is always kind of like this, that's why Tommy likes him, that's why they're friends. Purpled is one of the few people who cut the bullshit with him, he's one of the few people who tell Tommy to it as it is.

"Volatile?" Tommy repeats, "what the fuck does that—"

Purpled blinks at him a few times.

"Kinoko Library," he peels off the yoghurt lid putting it in the big, "you're kind of unhinged and kinda have a reputation in fucking up the plans of the people you work with…" Purpled starts rummaging around for a spoon.

"I can help! I can't just let Tubbo rot in prison— you have no right to keep this from me."

Purpled slowly looks up from where he's looking for a spoon, tilting his head at Tommy, "I thought you didn't have your powers?"

"I— yeah?"

"How are you helping?" Purpled asks.

There's something genuinely earnest about it too, like Purpled isn't even trying to insult him, he genuinely wants to know *how* the fuck Tommy would help among all of this.

Still, there's rage rising in his body, he can feel it. A few months ago he could feel his powers surging to the surface, the air

"I— I'm not useless without my powers."

Purpled continues his search for a spoon, "I know that. You're useless dead though."

"Are you just forgetting I barely used my powers for most of the time I was a vigilante? I'm not useless."

"Look," Purpled snaps, spinning around, "you spent months healing, and I'm proud of you for that. You're doing well now, you did not fight this hard to leave all of this behind to just jump back into it. It's dangerous for you and Tubbo's friends for you to get involved."

"I don't care about the danger, it's Tubbo!"

"You're pretty good at running from your problems, Tommy," Purpled says with a sigh, "run from this one too."

"You don't get it, what if it was me—"

"You wouldn't be in this situation," Purpled says like it's the easiest thing in the world, "and if you were I don't think you'd want me wasting my time searching for a dead body. If you did that's fine—"

"You don't know he's dead!" Tommy yells.

Purpled slams his yoghurt cup down, “no. I don’t. You know what I do know, *Thomas?* I know that William Nelson-Jones has killed for less, I know that Tubbo is the biggest threat to his entire fucking deal in years apart from Theseus. If Tubbo isn’t dead he *should* be, if Tubbo isn’t dead then Nelson-Jones wants him for something and that’s scarier actually.”

Tommy just stares at him.

“None of you fucking think,” Purpled murmurs under his breath, “Techno sometimes is the only guy with half a fucking brain. You can’t save everyone. The world can’t stop turning because someone is dead.”

“You’re being a right dickhead right now.”

Purpled’s jaw clenches, “so sorry I’m not giving you information that would get you killed. I’ll do better next time.”

And with that Purpled takes his yoghurt cup and retreats to his room.

No one talks about how boring revolutions are, and how much information they have to scrounge through before they find *anything* even slightly useful.

Which is how Aimsey finds themself sitting at the computer on another late night.

Ranboo is sitting at a computer next to them. Ranboo is quiet, tapping a pencil against a notepad that they haven’t touched in ages. Sniff is hunched over a computer across the other side of the room.

“You guys ever heard of Victor Sarafin?” Ranboo asks.

“Uh… I recognise the name,” Sniff says, “not sure where from though. Aimsey?”

“Nah,” Aimsey sighs at the fifth unnamed folder they’ve run into today, at this point he understands why no one has taken down Nelson-Jones at this point because the amount of time it takes to go through these unnamed, unsorted files is honestly a bit ridiculous.

Ranboo hums absent-mindedly before typing something.

Aimsey brings up another file, this is a scanned image of a report or something—

Oh it’s actually interesting.

Aimsey sits up a little bit higher, tilting their head at the computer in front of them.

The report is something that Aimsey has seen before— well, she knows the information from it. It’s one of the pages from the November 16th Apartment Collapse report. They haven’t seen the report in a while but they vaguely recognise the names.

What they *don’t* recognise is underneath the list are two more names scribbled in.

Jaiden Amsel → Haurire
Roier Parkoeir → Latrodectus

“Huh,” Aimsey says.

“What?” Sniff looks up from their spot at their computer.

“So… you know that apartment collapse report, it’s basically tattooed on the inside of my eyeballs. They made us learn it a lot at school. There’s a list of all the people who died in that and… yeah.”

“Yes,” Sniff says as Ranboo just pulls a confused face.

“So there’s all these names, you know like Theodore Achetz-Matthews, Mia Alvarez, the list goes on… at the bottom, written in are two names. Jaiden Amsel and Roier Parkoeir. Then they have like… Haurire and Latrodectus next to them with little arrows.”

“Huh?” Ranboo leans on their chair to look over Aimsey’s shoulder, “huh… they do. There’s also a Bobby Amsel-Parkoeir in the top list.”

“Those sound like hero names,” Sniff stands up, “did they not put two names on the record because they’re heroes names? They released these reports to the public. It makes sense to not put the hero's identities on there.”

“Have you ever heard of… Latrodectus and Haurire though?” xe sighs, leaning back in their chair, eyes narrowed at the screen.

“I mean… ten years ago heroes died a lot,” Ranboo frowns at the screen, “these could just be heroes that got caught up in the November 16th Apartment Collapse. They could have died in their homes rather than at work, they might’ve been off-duty heroes?”

“It’s an apartment in Logstedchire, why would heroes live there?” Aimsey leans forwards, running a hand through her hair, “I just don’t get it. They’re listed separately.”

“We can ask Techno about it,” Sniff says quietly, “if he doesn’t know we can ask Phil, if Phil doesn’t know we can do violent acts.”

“Good point.”

“No one ever mentions how long you have to wait,” Sniff throws themself back into their chair with a deep sigh, “like— we’re waiting on Purpled, we’re waiting to ask Techno something, we’re just waiting all the time.”

Ranboo goes quiet, eyes darting over to Aimsey.

“Yeah…” Aimsey sighs, “but— the more careful we are the less likely we are to fuck this up. If we fuck this up we’re all in jail and then there’s no hope of getting Tubbo out of jail. It’s boring yeah, but we want him back, and we want Nelson-Jones back, and that means wading through thousands of terribly titled PDFs.”

Ranboo clears their throat, spinning the monitor around so it's facing towards Aimsey and Sniff, "uh, sorry to interrupt but— I think I found something."

Aimsey whips around, "huh—"

"So, these are payrolls right," Ranboo says, and it does indeed look like a payroll, "one of the names here is Victor Sarafin, and I thought that was weird… and I like… kind of recognised the name and *that's* weird right."

"Duh."

"So… quickest Google search in the world," Ranboo says with a snort, "Victor Sarafin— a lot of the information seems to not be there but I think he was one of the lead scientists working on Blue in the early 2000s. He died a couple of years ago from… mysterious circumstances."

"Blue's that old?" Sniff leans forwards, "that makes blue like twenty years old— it only became used in Logstedchire and stuff like—"

"About fifteen years ago?" Ranboo finishes, "yeah…"

"So— one of the people working on blue years ago is on a payroll that is on Nelson-Jones's files."

"Correct," Ranboo says.

"Which could mean nothing," Sniff says in a voice which everyone knows means *something* , because all of those things lining up are ridiculous.

"So… Nelson-Jones funded Blue?" Aimsey says slowly.

Ranboo, Sniff and Aimsey all exchange glances.

"But why?" Sniff says, "it makes no sense for like— heroes to need blue, it has such a high kill rate. Its power benefits aren't even confirmed— like Techno downgraded powers he lost his healing powers for strength."

"Sounds like a failed science experiment."

"That's it!" Aimsey points at Ranboo, "I mean— maybe they developed blue for like ten years, realised they weren't getting anywhere with it— or lost funding or whatever. Victor What's-His-Name could have tweaked the formula to make it suitable for just… general consumption. Or he might not even have, someone also totally could have leaked it or used it or—"

"What would they have wanted it for though?" Sniff asks, "like— powers *are* getting stronger they proved that like fifty years ago as more and more hybrid genetics get entangled."

"Stronger heroes?" Ranboo offers.

“But *why?”*

Aimsey takes a deep breath before landing face down on the desk in front of her. Blue and Apartment Collapses, the more they find out the more fucking confusing it gets. Still nothing on the Tubbo-Baghera-Purpled lead.

“None of it makes sense,” Aimsey murmurs, “there’s just so many pieces and none of it connects. Why would he still have this stuff on his files?”

“Doesn’t know how to delete them?” the amount of disdain contained in Sniff’s voice is truly impressive.

Aimsey sighs, leaning back in their seat to crack their back for a few moments. Something in his back pops and it honestly feels very nice, they surge back forwards, staring at all the badly named PDFs and Word documents laying in front of them.

Ranboo snorts.

“What?” Sniff asks from across the room.

“There’s someone on a payroll from like five years ago named Fit,” they snort again, “that’s a dumb name.”

There is a long moment of silence.

“Ranboo…”

“Yeah?”

“Your name is Ranboo.”

“Oh. Yeah. It is.”

Sniff facepalms. Ranboo looks a bit sheepish about the entire thing, slight smile on his face as Aimsey gives them the most deadpanned look they are capable of.

Ranboo hums, “huh. This payment was on the day of Victor’s death.”

“Is that… weird?” Aimsey asks slowly.

“Probably just a funny coincidence,” Ranboo is quiet for a few moments, “this pay is the only one not on the fortnightly pay cycle though.”

“Probably just overtime or something they paid all at once,” Sniff yawns, “they do that all the time for my pay. Was it on a Wednesday?”

“I don’t— know?”

Aimsey leans back in her seat, finding themselves smiling despite it all. Things aren’t great now— they’re no where ahead of what they had been a few days ago, but they’re finding

information and…

They’re gonna be able to find Tubbo.

There’s just… a lot to get through before that.

Aimsey cracks their knuckles against the desk before xe looks back up at the files.

Fit’s specialty has never been tracking, he will admit it. That’s always been more something Cellbit took on rather than himself, but still, a job is a job and Fit needs to get paid. He’s not planning on taking a life tonight, so he just brings himself a knife— just in case.

It’s not like it’s hard to find Purpled, the bright purple hoodie as the vigilante outfit was never a smart move.

Across the rooftop he can see someone who, truly, he did not think he’d see again. Fit can only see Charlie’s back but there’s something eerily familiar about the slightly translucent green figure.

Purpled lands a few metres to the side of Charlie, holding a thick brown paper bag. Fit slowly crouches behind one of the air conditioner units on the top of the roof.

He’s towards the edge of the building himself, meaning that he can jump off if something goes wrong. There’s a fire escape underneath him and the alley he’ll land on turns off onto a fairly busy street, he’s covering his arm with a relatively thin hoodie with his knife tucked into the hoodie pocket.

Purpled plonks on the ground next to Charlie, handing something to him.

He throws his hood off his head, revealing relatively light hair.

Looks like Cellbit got that right in the report at least.

Fit can’t see the exact shade of it due to the lack of lighting, but it’s either blond or a light brown. Not incredibly messy or curly but relatively straight, a couple of wavy bits but nothing incredible.

He still clearly has his mask and goggles on, Fit can see them from where he is. He also knows Purpled has a voice modulator so he’s not going to get a lot of information on the boy’s real voice *unless* he turns it off, but Fit doubts that.

“Did you get brown rice?” Charlie asks, taking the package out of Purpled’s hands.

“Uh… maybe,” Purpled holds whatever he’s holding out in front of him, “they ran out of beans though.”

“They’re always fucking running out of beans— whatever,” Charlie sighs, “I would inject these into my veins if I could.”

Fit frowns.

Huh.

“Hook up to an IV with burritos,” Purpled murmurs, nodding before unwrapping his own package and—

Oh. They’re talking about burritos.

Duh .

Fit wants to laugh, instead he presses a hand to his mouth to stifle his laughter. This feels about correct, following Purpled for any sort of useful information and instead getting a whole lot of nothing.

Still, Fit’s here, he might as well listen for as long as he can.

“So Baghera is gonna be…” Purpled moves his head a little bit, signalling another conversation they must have had.

Fit can feel his entire body tense at that, just for a second. *Baghera?* What the fuck is she doing back here—

“At the farmer’s market on Saturday,” Charlie confirms, “she’ll probably be around the juice stand and immediately try and run away from you as soon as you ask any questions.”

“That’s fine, I’m fast,” Purpled leans back, “you know Baghera, right?”

He can hear Charlie spluttering for a few moments, “uh— yeah. You know that.”

“If I told you someone paid her two and a half million dollars shortly before she stopped selling weapons would you be shocked?”

Fit’s mouth also falls open, he can only imagine Charlie’s doing the same.

“W— what?”

“That’s a yes then.”

“She… huh, who paid her?”

“Can’t tell you,” Purpled almost sounds gleeful about it, the fucking shit, “not yet. I’d have to check with my *clients* . It’s the reason I want to talk to her though. I mean, it makes sense why she’d stop selling weapons to vigilantes. Someone must’ve basically bought her out.”

And Fit can’t help but stare at their backs.

Who the fuck would *want* to buy Baghera out? Who the fuck would know to buy Baghera out, she was one of the best kept secrets of the vigilante underworld, for a reason.

Charlie is also quiet, and Fit knows that he’s thinking too.

“Huh,” is what Charlie eventually comes up with, “that’s… huh.”

“Yeah?” Purpled asks, eyebrow raised.

“Yeah… huh,” Charlie says.

“Why did they start hunting vigilantes?” Purpled asks.

Fit nearly falls over, which is impressive because he’s sitting down, using his arm to prop him up so he can see around the air conditioning unit.

“Because one killed Phantom,” Charlie’s voice is impressively even, the tone he uses when he’s practiced something again and again, Fit can *hear* it in his voice, that tone hasn’t changed even years later.

Purpled is quiet for a few moments, “that can’t be the only reason though, right?”

“Vigilantes tended to undermine the power of heroes,” Charlie continues, “the committee in particular didn’t like that.”

“But then…” Purpled hums, “then heroes didn’t really patrol down in Logstedchire or even Lower L’Manberg. If they were afraid of being undermined just because vigilantes were around surely they’d put more people in those areas to like… un-undermine people.”

“I’m not going to pretend to understand it,” Charlie laughs, “they make some dodgy decisions up above.”

Purpled just hums, thoughtfully, “didn’t heroes die because of vigilantes before Phantom though?”

“I don’t know.”

That sends Purpled back into contemplative silence.

Fit can not fathom *why* Charlie is speaking around everything, he’s clearly eavesdropping on a conversation where he doesn’t understand half the context but it’s a weird move. It’s an odd thing for someone to do and Fit doesn’t know—

Why would he…

Sure.

Whatever.

“So…” Charlie says, “how’s life?”

“Would be better if vigilantes who have been around for like… double the time I have been weren’t lying because they thought it protected me.”

“That’s not what—”

“Isn’t it?” Purpled snaps, “because it feels like that. How have you been in the game as long as you have and don’t know if heroes were dying because of vigilantes before *the* one everyone points to. It does not make fucking sense.”

And at that precise moment, Fit is so baffled by the tone that Purpled uses that his prosthetic arm, propping him up, slides against the concrete of the roof, making an awful grating noise.

Purpled’s head whips around and Fit throws himself back behind the air conditioning unit as quickly as he can.

“Did you hear that?” Purpled asks.

“What, it’s probably just like a bird—”

Fit slowly starts shuffling further around the air conditioning unit. Trying to keep himself as quiet as possible.

“At night?” Purpled deadpans.

Fit can hear the rustle of clothes and footsteps starting to get closer to the air conditioning unit.

He hears a sigh from Charlie, “you’re being paranoid.”

“How the fuck have you survived as a vigilante for like ten years,” Purpled yells back, “this is like the start of a horror movie. The person is like ‘oh don’t worry about it’ and then they get stabbed. It doesn’t hurt to check—”

Fit shifts around until his legs are dangling off the edge of the building, then he pushes off. He lands on a fire escape and the metal lets out a resounding *clang* .

He hears a noise of surprise from back on the roof, and Fit doesn’t hesitate to throw himself off the fire escape. He lands on the ground with a thump, using his prosthetic to absorb most of the impact.

There’s a yell overhead and Fit takes off down the street.

Here’s the thing, Fit is not overly fast— he knows that he wouldn’t be able to beat Purpled in a race, he’s not sure about Charlie anymore, they’ve changed a lot since the last time Fit even had a chance to have a foot race.

So he knows he’s not going to outrun the vigilantes while they stay on the roof.

He does, however, know the importance of blending in.

And he also knows scouting locations out before going in to eavesdrop, so he knows that there’s a convenience store on the street. And he also knows that no self-respecting vigilante is going to accuse someone in a convenience store of following them.

So Fit skids into the convenience store, keeping his head down and finding his way to the back of the store. There's another person in here along with the cashier, the cashier looks at Fit with an eyebrow raised.

Fit just raises an eyebrow back.

The fluorescent light is grating on his eyes, there's shitty pop music playing in the background and Fit finds his way to the lolly section at the back. There's a couple of things, and he might as well get something for the kids.

Ramón and Em would be happy with the dark chocolate but Richas doesn't like dark chocolate— so it's a matter of should he get the same thing for all of them or different things. If they get different things then they'll fight over how big each item is.

Children.

So the answer seems to be to get something that *all* of them like slightly less.

And is also the same size.

If he gets Skittles they're going to fight over how many each person gets, three chocolate bars seems like the best move.

Fatherhood.

Fit eventually manages to choose the correct chocolates, milk chocolate— which all three of them tolerate and they sure as fuck won't be *upset* about it, it's just that they won't be as happy about it if they were just eating their favourites.

But they're unreliable with their favourites so this is the next best option.

He puts the chocolates in his pocket and heads down the street, eyes darting around for Purpled or even Charlie. He doesn't *think* either of them have enough information to figure out that it was him eavesdropping, but still he doesn't want to run into them.

The night is quiet, it's one of the rare nights when the protests have died out before it's that late. So the streets are quiet, very few people are out and about due to curfews or whatever shit ass reasons people have implemented.

It's not like they check on the curfew very often, and even if they did Fit would have his work ID to show them.

There's a noise to his left and Fit's head snaps around to look at it.

Standing on the edge of a lamp post, crouched is Charlie.

Fit for a moment can't do anything but stare up at him. He's changed his face as a part of his disguise, Fit knows that but still his hair is so familiar. Even when green and slightly transparent, Fit can almost imagine that they're both eighteen again and the world is a large hopeful thing.

Charlie's eyes go wide as they land on Fit.

Fit for a moment can do nothing but stare back.

"Fit?" Charlie says like he's looking at a dead man.

Fit nods slowly, "yeah. Hi."

"What are you— what are you—" Charlie looks around, "what are you doing?"

He doesn't move from his spot on the lamp post and Fit doesn't feel any desire to get closer.

"Late night snacks for the kids, turns out Richas and Em never grew out of their desire to eat at two in the morning."

Charlie laughs, and something about it is so fond it almost feels like they're kids again.

Fit shoves his hands in his pockets, "I gotta go, leaving the kids home alone for more than ten minutes becomes a gamble."

Charlie just nods a few times, before taking a step back, "yeah I— I'm gonna also go. I'm glad to see you… y'know, not dead."

Fit snorts, "you too."

He turns around as quickly as he can, and walks away as quickly as he can, while still keeping a pace that if anyone is staring at him feels realistic. He clutches the chocolates in his pocket in his prosthetic hand, hoping that he doesn't crush them.

The trip home is quiet.

Fit is gripping onto the chocolates as he tries to calm his thoughts. They've changed, that's the whole point. They've both changed and they'll keep on changing and Fit and Charlie barely know each other anymore, there's nothing but a portion of shared history tying them together now.

A history they're both trying to forget.

Still there's something heavy in his heart seeing Charlie again.

Fit takes a deep breath as he approaches his apartment, reaching for his keys tucked in his back pocket. He's almost home, and home is what actually matters not… everything else. He walks into the main lobby of the building, giving a small nod at the very few people he passes.

They live in one of the better apartments in Kinoko, it has four bedrooms and a view across L'Manberg towards the water. There's a pool and a gym and a courtyard for the kids to play around in. They're on one of the upper floors and almost any cost imaginable is paid for by Fit's employers if he asks for it.

Fit unlocks his door, slowly opening the door to the apartment.

Them getting the apartment was nothing short of a miracle facilitated by his employers.

He closes the door behind him, it latches with a gentle noise.

There's a few toys from Ramón scattered on the floor, Em still has what appears to have be her latest art project on the floor. There's papers and pencils and even glue thrown everywhere, it looks a little bit like a mess but Fit can't fault anyone for it.

He walks through the foyer into the main living area. One side is the kitchen, on the other is the kitchen with a table and chairs thrown haphazardly in the middle to almost count as a dining room. Across the table are even more art supplies, and a steady trail of toys leading from the table down the hallway towards the bedrooms.

The kitchen is relatively clean, which is impressive considering several factors and most of them involve the fact the kids were in charge of dinner. The counters are clean, the floors aren't covered in food and it seems someone's done the dishes, which is always nice. A couple of papers stuck onto the fridge with magnets have been knocked off, but Fit can sort that later.

Resting by the door are everyone's packed backpacks for school, and Fit knows that their lunches are already made and in the fridge.

Across from the kitchen, curled up on the couch is one Cellbit and Richas. Richas is curled into his dad in a way that he doesn't do very often anymore, and Cellbit's hands are absent mindedly running through their hair.

Fit gives Cellbit a smile, "hey."

"Hi," Cellbit says just as flatly.

"Are the others asleep?"

"Ramón and Em are having a sleepover in Ramón's room," Cellbit explains, his eyes still on his kid's head, "was your information gathering successful?"

"Mhm."

"You're going to be able to complete the job, right?" Cellbit's eyes finally tear away from his kid and land on Fit, "you're not going to be a coward about it, are you?"

"No," Fit pulls his jacket off, throwing it across the back of one of the dining chairs,

"You get weird about jobs involving kids," Cellbit says.

"I can't think of why," Fit deadpans, looking at Richas.

Richas looks so calm, generally there's something a little bit stressed in his face. He carries a weight that neither Em or him should, but they do. There's always something a little bit sad

in their expressions, Richas especially.

He looks at peace for once, and Fit knows that he would tear the world apart without hesitation just for the chance to protect that peace Richas has right now.

“He laughs like Bobby did,” Cellbit eventually says, so, so quietly, “Em clicks her tongue when she’s thinking like Bagi did.”

“When Ramón is frustrated he starts talking with his hands more. Pac did that too.”

There’s a long heavy silence around the two of them.

The silence between the two of them is always heavy and suffocating, and Fit knows he hasn’t learnt how to live around it.

“I’ll be gone for a month,” Cellbit says, “I— it’s a long infiltration mission.”

“Okay.”

“Thank you for looking after him.”

“I don’t do it for you,” Fit moves away from the lounge room towards the kitchen.

“It’s not like Pac is here to say thanks,” Cellbit shoots right back, “so I guess I have to do it for the both of us.”

“I guess so,” Fit says through gritted teeth.

And he puts the chocolates in the packed school lunches that Cellbit made for them, and he tries not to resent the fact it’s Cellbit who made these lunches.

“I just think,” Tommy says, legs up over the back of the couch, “that I could take a crocodile in a fight.”

“You couldn’t even take an alligator,” Purpled deadpans.

“What’s the difference anyway?” Tommy asks, “they’re basically the same thing.”

Tommy gets to watch with great glee as Purpled’s eyes actually twitches, he opens and closes his mouth before letting out a deep sigh, “yes Tommy, they’re exactly the same thing.”

“Knew it.”

There’s a moment of silence as Tommy swings back up the right way, sitting on the couch like a normal person.

He sits up just as Aimsey flies across the room, slamming into the window and groaning.

Techno wipes his hands on his shirt, glancing at Aimsey now sitting against the window, seemingly debating their life.

“That wasn’t even that hard,” Techno murmurs, “your powers should be able to overpower me.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I’m not sure if you could if you tried,” Techno responds.

Sniff snorts from their spot on the couch next to Purpled.

Something about that makes something familiar light up in Aimsey’s eyes, and xir shoots up onto their feet, a flow of red energy forming around their hand.

Tommy watches it, there’s something about Aimsey’s powers that are just… prettier than Tommy’s, and he understands that’s a weird thing to get fixated on, Aimsey’s powers always look controlled and calm.

Tommy’s used to be sporadic and looked like lightning and arcs of sharp energy.

Aimsey draws more power around her hands, before leaping forwards. A tendril of energy shoots out towards Techno, and Techno throws himself onto the ground, rolling to the side before popping back onto his feet.

He grins at Aimsey, “come on Teese, you can do better than that.”

“You can’t just use my last name to bait me into a fight,” Aimsey throws another tendril of energy towards Techno, it arcs in the air like a wave going to crash into someone, before at the last second Aimsey shifts its direction.

It slaps Techno across the face.

They’re corporal, Tommy realises with a sense of both amusement and fear. Aimsey’s found a way to turn their powers corporal which is— wild. Tommy’s only ever affected energy, he hasn’t… *created* energy, not solid energy that he could control.

Interesting.

Tommy’s hand comes up to his mouth and he chews on his thumbnail.

Techno takes a few large steps to close the distance between them, and throws a relatively lazy punch towards Aimsey. Aimsey brings a hand up and a red water-like shield blocks it, before Aimsey manages to throw her own punch in.

They punch Techno across the face, and Techno’s head snaps to the side.

A grin spreads across Techno’s face and he comes back with another swing that Aimsey manages to bat away with some sort of shield.

Aimsey steps to the side, summoning more powers into his hands and—

Techno clocks them right across the face.

Aimsey truly falls like a sack of potatoes, slamming into the floor with a loud thump as they hold their nose with both hands. “fuck!” is what Aimsey says.

“You’re fine,” Techno says, “I think. Let me see.”

Aimsey looks up at Techno.

Techno stares at Aimsey for a few seconds, “I think I broke your nose.”

“What!” Aimsey shrieks, although it sounds funny through the blood starting to gush out of his nose, “why would you—”

“It’s not like I meant to!” Techno returns, he picks Aimsey up without any trouble, “alright, Daniel could you get some ice packs, please?”

“On it,” Purpled launches himself over the back of the couch, stumbling over to the freezer.

“Can I just fix it?” Sniff wiggles her fingers, “this is like my whole power set—”

“Okay, new lesson,” Techno sighs, “moving the bone back into place right now won’t prevent the swelling, we need the swelling to go down first then either I can do it or if Aimsey wants you can do it.”

“Or a medical professional,” Aimsey mutters, but again, it’s very hard to hear through the blood that is now starting to drip onto the carpet.

“Hold your nose and lean forwards,” Techno says, which Aimsey does.

Aimsey tilts forwards, holding onto their nose, glaring at Techno.

Techno gives them a slightly apologetic smile, “you’re fine.”

“You’re not the one bleeding out of their face,” Aimsey mutters back, voice stuffy from the whole… being punched in the face, “fuck that hurts.”

“You’re fine,” Techno says again.

Purpled leaps over the couch again, handing Aimsey the ice pack wrapped in a paper towel, before promptly throwing himself back on the couch again landing with a thump next to Tommy.

Sniff is still sitting on the couch, leaning forwards picking at a scab on their hands as her eyes watch Aimsey and Techno, darting back and forth between the two of them.

“Reckon you could take a bear?” Tommy asks.

“Like steal it or in a fight?” Purpled says.

“Yes.”

“I feel like stealing it would be hard, I could probably beat it in a fight if I had a gun.”

“Could you?” Sniff asks, eyes still trained on Aimsey and Techno.

“You’re being dramatic— you’re fine, you’re catching all the blood—”

“Yeah,” Purpled says, “I’m pretty good with a gun.”

“I’m glad to know the *security* has good skills with their guns,” Sniff says, “why does The Tower even have security we’re superheroes—”

“Because there’s like fifty heroes and hundreds of people who work here?” Purpled says slowly, “it’s our job to protect people from the general public, not the threats you guys are dealing with. We deal with like… annoying people, you deal with gangs.”

“You know you can pull your punches! You don’t need to just punch me in the face.”

“I didn’t mean to.”

“Oh well, in that case then.”

“Wait, why are you here then?” Sniff asks, “shouldn’t you be in the lobby?”

Purpled shrugs, “I’m Techno’s favourite. I get away with all kinds of shit.”

“You are not his favourite,” Tommy gasps, “I am clearly the favourite I’m like the first child —”

“Are you kidding me? The first child is never the favourite,” Sniff leans back onto the couch, half-laying, half-sitting.

“And aren’t you fighting right now?” Purpled says.

“Anyway!” Tommy claps his hands together, “I should probably go and do the job they pay me to do.”

“Ugh— same,” Purpled sighs looking up at the roof.

“It’s so unfair,” Tommy complains, “the heroes get to just hang out all day while we have to do actual work.”

“You’re not going to learn anything if I don’t punch you in the face.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Hey, I learnt that way.”

“YOU GREW UP IN A FIGHTING RING?”

“We also get shot,” Sniff offers, flatly.

“You ever been shot?”

Sniff’s expression says that she thinks about it for a few seconds, before realising, no, in fact, she has not been shot. They frown and cross their arms, “have you?”

“… not recently.”

“Wait what?” Aimsey says, snapping them out of fighting with Techno, “you’ve been shot?”

“It’s not like it’s a special thing to be shot,” Purpled mutters, “I got shot in the last Elysium attack—”

“YOU’VE BOTH BEEN SHOT?” Aimsey yells.

“Anyway!” Tommy jumps up off the couch, Purpled following him, “I’m going to do the work that I need to do.”

“Wait, we need to talk—” there’s something in Techno’s voice that almost makes Tommy consider not leaving.

But Tommy’s very good at running, and he has no reason to believe he should stop doing that any time soon.

Instead, he turns on his heel and walks towards the elevator as quickly as he can.

Purpled stumbles after him, tripping on his own feet before managing to catch himself and follow him.

Aimsey and Sniff both look baffled, Sniff turned around on the couch looking at them both and Aimsey still holding their nose with tissues catching the blood, the ice pack resting precariously on the bridge of their nose.

“You can’t just avoid me forever—” Techno yells after him.

Tommy slams the third floor button, then the close door button.

Tommy waves as the elevator door shuts.

For a moment the two of them are quiet, just standing looking ahead. The elevator whirs as the annoyingly familiar music just plays. Tommy lets his shoulders relax a little bit, taking a deep breath.

Everything is fine.

And logically he knows that, *no* he in fact can not avoid Techno forever. He also knows that he is going to do his fucking best to avoid Techno from talking about… *that* for as long as he physically can.

Purpled glances at him, “you do realise your office is… on that floor, right?”

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” Purpled looks back straight ahead, “do you actually have work to do?”

“Gotta talk with a publicist, a journalist also reached out for a comment on the security in the tower after the Elysium attack on the tower.”

“They’re still pesterin’ you about that? It’s been months?”

Tommy sighs, “Elysium have been mostly quiet since then, they want more stories to run about them but Elysium just… haven’t been doing jackshit to be honest.”

“In the— attacking, shooting, killing people way,” Purpled adds, “they’re still funding food banks and I am almost certain they’ve busted the fighting rings.”

“Yes, I know that,” Tommy hisses, “I’m not fucking stupid.”

“Could’ve fucking fooled me.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“I think that means I’ve won the argument.”

“I will explode you with my mind—”

The elevator doors open.

Sure enough, Sam Warren is standing there, a placating but ultimately empty as fuck smile across his face. Sam’s not holding anything right now but Tommy can feel his heart rate rise as he stares straight at him.

“Oh, Daniel!” Sam says with a smile, “I didn’t know you’d be here, aren’t you supposed to be working right now?”

Purpled shrugs, hands firmly shoved in his pocket, “I am.”

Tommy can feel the way he automatically shifts behind Purpled, not a lot but his shoulder tucks behind Purpled’s. He can also feel the way Purpled stands up a little bit taller, the way his shoulders set.

They’re on the same page about Sam, and the near-relief that floods Tommy’s body is ridiculous.

“I hardly doubt that Techno, Sniff or Aimsey need your protection,” Sam’s still smiling and it’s grating and awful and annoying and Tommy wants to rip his fucking face off with his bare fucking hands.

Purpled tilts his head to the side a little, like he doesn't quite understand. He jerks his head in Tommy's direction, "maybe not, but he does."

Sam laughs at that, "I doubt that, Daniel."

Purpled's shoulders tense even more, "move."

"What?"

Purpled slams all the elevator buttons at once.

"Get the fuck out of our way," Purpled hisses.

The elevator stops. Sam just stares at them, expression unreadable. The elevator doors swing open.

Purpled grabs Tommy by the front of his hoodie and hauls the two of them out of there.

Tommy doesn't even know what floor he's on, he just knows that everything about what just happened is awful and the worst and he's going to rip his own face off if it means Sam leaves him the fuck alone.

Purpled keeps his hold on the front of Tommy's hoodie and drags him towards a set of cubicles. He then shoves Tommy inside the first empty one and Tommy sits down on the chair, it's a pretty good chair all things considered.

"You good?" Purpled glances over his shoulder.

"Sam's weird right?" Tommy asks, "like— he had such a weird vibe last time we were alone and then Ranboo showed up."

"Huh?" Purpled's head whips towards Tommy, "w— what?"

"Yeah uh, Ranboo showed up. Sam was being kinda weird… very weird, actually."

"Ranboo was in the tower?"

"Yeah."

Purpled blinks once, then twice, "wait— when?"

"Like a couple of weeks back it doesn't matter—"

Purpled frowns, looking away, "have you told Techno about any of this?"

"I— ugh," Tommy runs a hand down his face, "I don't want to tell Techno shit about shit right now."

"That man looks like he's waiting for a chance to get you alone and stab you in the fucking throat," Purpled hisses, "the only person Sam is afraid of in the tower is Techno, you *know* you have to talk to him about this, right?"

“I— no. Techno’s being way too pushy with shit that doesn’t concern him.”

Purpled blinks a few times, he opens and closes his mouth a few times.

Then he slaps Tommy in the face.

Tommy yelps, hand coming up to grab his cheek, “what the fuck is wrong with you?”

“WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH *YOU* ?” Purpled grabs Tommy by the shoulders, it hurts, “you’re being stupid and for what! Ignore your pride for one fucking second. Sam has so much more power than you, he knows I’m Purpled— he’s probably put it together that you're Theseus just from that alone! He’s going to fucking kill you or arrest you or something I don’t even know. And you’re refusing to tell one of the only people who can help you with *any* of that because what? You’re too proud to have another difficult conversation?”

Tommy shakes Purpled’s hands off his shoulders, “you don’t get it so don’t even pretend to.”

“No, I don’t!” Purpled takes a deep breath, “no I don’t fucking understand, Tommy.”

“Techno’s being a bastard.”

“I don’t think he is. I reckon you’re the one being a bastard.”

“You’re supposed to be on my side!”

Purpled slaps him in the face again, “I’m on the side that doesn’t get you hurt. And that feels like Techno’s side.”

“Stop fucking hitting me!”

“Stop being worthy of hitting!”

Tommy glares up at Purpled, “Techno is being pushy, he’s not going to listen to me until I tell him about this thing—”

“He’s not going to—” Purpled grabs his own hair, looking like he’s going to pull it out of his own head for a moment before just staring up at the roof, “Techno isn’t going to *withhold protection* because you’re being a fuckhead. He’s never not listened to you, or me, or Aimsey or Sniff.”

Tommy sinks back into the office chair.

“He literally gave you that—” Purpled gestures at Tommy’s necklace, “because he doesn’t want you to feel like you’re alone. He can find you from anywhere if you want it. You’re being dumb.”

Tommy grits his teeth, “you’re being dumb.”

“And you know I’m right,” Purpled says with a tired sigh, “Tommy.”

“Yeah, I know. I know.”

With a sigh, Purpled sits on the floor, letting out a deep sigh of relief, “you’re dumb and I hate you.”

“Hate you too,” Tommy mutters back, “don’t just slap me in the face.”

“Don’t be slap worthy. Sam is a risk to you, one that I can’t protect you from. We have to outsource to the actually scary people.”

Purpled lays down on the ground, the cubicle isn’t very big but that hasn’t stopped him. He stares up at the ceiling, arm thrown over his forehead as he just looks up. He’s breathing heavily, like he’s about to cry.

“You okay?”

“Yes,” Purpled says through gritted teeth.

Tommy just looks at him.

Purpled doesn’t stop looking at the ceiling.

“You’re my best friend, you know that right?” Tommy whispers, “you’ve saved me from— myself and other people so many times and I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“Don’t mention it,” Purpled mutters.

“No, I think we should mention it. You seem to think it’s your given right to have to protect me from everything— from myself or bad decisions— it’s why you’re not telling me about Tubbo, it’s why you’re so frustrated by this. I’m so glad that you’re around, but— has this not been eating away at you? Aren’t you tired of looking out for my messes for— months at this point.”

Purpled takes his arm off of his forehead, sitting up slowly, “no. You’re my best friend.”

“You know we would still be best friends even if you did nothing more than showed up at my house and talked to me. You don’t *have* to do all of this. I can take care of myself.”

“You’ve been taking care of yourself your entire life.”

“You’ve been taking care of *yourself* your entire life,” Tommy leans forwards, “I mean— really speaking. We both have.”

“I can handle it.”

“Yeah and I *can* handle my shit, I’d rather handle it with you though. What if I just didn’t tell you about the things that were bothering me ever.”

“I’d feel… real upset you didn’t tell me anything. And just… heartbroken you went through it all alone.”

“Yeah,” Tommy whispers, “yeah. That’s how I’m feeling.”

Purpled hugs his legs to his chest, “we can stop talking about our feelings now.”

“Oh so I’m a coward because I’m walking away from difficult feelings and conversations but you can do it?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re my best friend.”

“I know.”

“And I want to help you when I can.”

“I know.”

“And the only way I can help you is if I know what’s going on with you.”

“I knowwww.”

“And knowing what’s going on with you means you have to use human words rather than just hoping I can read your mind.”

Purpled sighs, leaning against the white divider wall of the cubicle, “we… we can’t talk about it here, that fucking AI motherfucker might be listening. Or like… anyone.”

“At home?”

“Yeah…” Purpled whispers, “home.”

“Let me hug you,” Tommy says.

“Huh? What? No—”

Tommy launches himself at Purpled, pushing out of the chair and tackling him. He wraps his arms around Purpled nice and tight, so this fucker can’t get away from him even if he tried. Tommy hugs him tightly, “you can pretend you’re not touch starved, that's fine. But I’m gonna hug you anyway.”

“I hate you,” Purpled murmurs into Tommy’s shoulder.

He just hugs Purpled tighter.

“I’ve missed you,” Purpled’s voice is slightly choked.

“I’ve always been here.”

“Hasn’t felt like that,” Purpled’s arms come up to properly hug Tommy back.

As soon as Purpled starts to let go of Tommy, Tommy drops his arms too, just looking at Purpled sitting in front of him. Purpled wipes his eyes with the back of his sleeve, turning away from Tommy so he's sitting against the divider.

"We should probably go do our jobs," Purpled mumbles, "the one we both get paid good money to do."

"Talk at home?"

"Yeah… home," Purpled sighs, "I'm going to be late home tonight, I have to meet up with someone."

Tommy raises an eyebrow, "like— the sort of thing you used to do for your old job or…"

"Yeah, kinda like that," Purpled shrugs his shoulders, "it's preferable to my current job—" he shudders.

Tommy laughs, holding his hand out to Purpled.

Purpled takes it and Tommy hauls him onto his feet.

"Do you seriously think you could take a crocodile in a fight?"

"A few months ago I totally—"

"But like… right now?"

"Maybe."

"A crocodile would beat your ass."

"I don't reckon," Tommy says, "can't you like sticky tape their mouths shut? Or rubber band them?"

"I don't know?" Purpled presses the down button on one of the elevators, "I'm not a crocodile expert."

"You should be," Tommy presses the button to go up on the elevator next to him, "have you considered quitting your job and becoming a crocodile expert."

"Ah yeah," Purpled sighs, "sounds like a good use of my time. A type of career that would bring home the money."

"I mean, I make enough money, you can chase your dreams of becoming a crocodile expert."

The elevator in front of Tommy opens, and Tommy shoots Purpled a grin, "chase your dreams, Daniel."

Purpled rolls his eyes so hard that for a moment Tommy has a genuine concern about Purpled's eyes falling out of his head.

Tommy steps into the elevator hitting the button for the SBI floor.

He takes a deep breath as the elevator whirs around him.

As far as his list of conversations he's excited to have… this one is pretty low.

The conversation with Techno is going to be difficult but honest— if anyone has a right to know everything it's Techno. That being said Tommy doesn't even *need* to talk to him about… that… if he doesn't want to, Sam is the priority right now.

Something in the back of his brain knows that Techno won't push, not really. He might try to get Tommy to talk about it, but he won't withhold anything else if Tommy truly doesn't want to talk about it.

Yeah, it's scary and Tommy's hands are shaking but Techno's never let him down before and he has no clue why that would even begin to change now.

He takes a deep breath, stepping out of the elevator.

He walks into the large living area on this floor, the offices are to the right and everyone's on their lunch break. The kitchen looks like a tornado has swarmed through it, and he knows it was Aimsey making lunch.

He huffs going to put the cheese and lettuce back in the fridge.

"Oi Tech," Tommy calls out, "can we talk for a bit there's something I need to tell you—"

There's a movement out of the corner of his eye—

A hand grabs Tommy's hair, yanking his head back as an arm is wrapped around his neck.

Everything Tommy was holding hits the ground.

He lets out a small noise as both hands shoot up to claw at whatever arm is trying to hold him. His nails dig in by instinct as he's lifted off the ground, feet struggling to find ground as he kicks uselessly.

Pain shoots through the side of his neck.

Tommy opens his mouth to *scream* . He kicks one of his feet back, managing to get his captor in the knee, Tommy digs his nails into the arm and pulls down with everything he has. This makes them cry out and Tommy lands on the ground.

He whips around staring at whoever it was— it's some pale, baby-faced person Tommy doesn't know, with incredibly light hair and a sort of blank expression. Nothing about them is special at all.

"What the fuck, man?" Tommy breathes out.

His eyes glance down to the item the person is holding.

A syringe.

His blood runs cold.

There's blue coloured droplets in it.

He's going to throw up.

"What the fuck?" Tommy whispers, "what the fuck is— what the fuck have you just done?"

There's a noise behind him and Tommy whips his head around.

Instead he's yanked backwards, he goes sprawling onto the ground and a foot is immediately planted against his chest.

He looks up at Sam standing over him and Tommy's head spins.

He's so fucking tired.

"Theseus," Sam says, "being dealt with in the hero's tower, it's almost ironic, isn't it?"

He's *so* fucking tired he can't even.

And he looks up at Sam, holding—

Another syringe—

Tommy knows Blue, he knows drugs, he's seen them, he's been around them, he's been around them for too long, he knows that much will kill a person. He knows that this is bad he knows— he knows, he knows, he knows.

And he knows that he's not going to fucking die today. He knows that there's not another option he's not dying today— he won't, he won't— he—

So Tommy screams, he writhes with his entire body, managing to get Sam's foot off of his chest. He rolls away as quickly as he can, hitting into some furniture he never cared for until now— he rolls back onto his feet, heaving.

He's not Theseus— he's just Tommy right now and Tommy is okay in hand-to-hand but he has no weapons and both of these people are taller than him and he knows Sam is stronger than him and he knows he's fucked, he's so fucked.

How long is he powerless?

No sparks form in his hand and Tommy's heart sinks.

His hands go up in front of him in an almost defensive stance. He's not going to die here, he refuses to fucking die here— he's not going to die.

Sam lunges and Tommy throws himself out of the way, managing to punch him in the side of the head before whirling around to whoever the baby-faced fucked head is and punching

them square in the face.

Then Tommy does what any semi-intelligent person would do in this situation.

He runs.

He runs for his life.

He knows this part of the tower better than either of them, he hopes. Next to the elevator is a stairwell, he knows how to skip large sections of the stairwell and he knows how to run and fight and he's not going out like this.

Tommy has not survived all of being Theseus to get taken out by a hero and— some fucker.

He flings the door open to the stairwell, immediately running to the railing and throwing himself off the edge of it.

For a moment he's just falling—

Then his time as Theseus kicks back in and his hands are *aching* but locked around the side of the stair railing.

He drops to the stairwell just underneath it and glances up.

Sam is also standing on the railing and—

Shitshitshit, he has to move.

Sam throws himself at Tommy.

Tommy's vision goes black for a second and pain shoots through the back of his head— his head is bleeding, that's not good. That's really not good. Everything blurs and Tommy manages to get his hand between his body and Sam, pushing at Sam's dumb fucking face, trying to aim for the eyes.

"Get off me!" Tommy screams, because the stairwell makes sound carry and *someone* has to hear this surely it's not quiet at all. He manages to get his other hand up and manages to grab Sam's head and slam it into the wall.

For a moment Sam goes limp and that's enough. Tommy slides away, starting his bolt down the stairs when—

It hits him, and Tommy nearly trips over his own feet.

A moment of silence in his body.

Then the pain shoots through his entire body, as every nerve in his body *alights.* He screams clutching his injured hand as blood flows and flows and flows. His eyes snap up towards Sam and Fredrick.

He can feel his breathing lighten, he can feel the way his blood is pulsing through his entire body, everything feels like it's on fire. It's burning, his body is burning from the inside out and they don't even know *what* they've done.

Tommy looks at them, opening his mouth and panting for breath.

He has to breathe, he has to breathe but everything hurt and he can feel the blood pounding in his head and breathing hurts but so does thinking and he can't stop doing either of those because he wants to live— he wants to live.

"What have you done?" Tommy breathes out.

Another burst of pain through his entire body and Tommy lands on his knees, he barely registers more than a dull ache as he holds his injured hand. He curls over with another burst of pain.

His blood is going to explode out of him, there's no other explanation. His blood is going to fucking explode out of him and he's going to die and everything hurts and oh it's so bad— it hasn't been this bad since he was six and he's not six anymore but everything hurts just as bad.

Vaguely he's aware of the concrete against his forehead, vaguely he's aware that Sam is saying something but everything is hurting and Tommy doesn't know what to do.

It hurts. Fuck it hurts and Tommy needs to do something because he fucking refuses to die here but it all hurts and *fuck* it hurts.

Sam's moving closer and Tommy knows he has the needle and—

He can feel a spark of power arc out of his hands, and screams as it does. It aches, it hurts, he's going to die. Something in his soul or brain or whatever is going to rip away from him and it's hurting so badly as it does so—

Sam's closer and Tommy has no one coming to save him and he can barely think and—

He doesn't want to die, he's not going to die— he fucking refuses to die.

Hanging in front of him is his necklace, from Techno all those months ago. Black and white and—

Sam's closer and everything hurts and *fuck* it hurts, another surge of power leaves his hands and Tommy grits his teeth. He can feel sparks flying off of him, he can feel arcs of tiny little bits of lightning leaving his body and it hurts so fucking bad.

He manages to grip a hand around the chain and the chain near melts underneath his hand.

With all the limited strength he has, Tommy slams the gemstone part of the necklace into the ground, he feels the way it breaks underneath his hand and the shards of sharp rock and gem digging into his hand.

There’s a sharp pain in his neck and then his eyes are rolling back as his head slams into the ground.

Chapter End Notes

hey so like. I know the horrors are happening but something funny i do is that whenever i’m writing someone struggling to talk because they’re eating i shove my hand into my mouth and try and talk around it and listen to what noise that makes. So like i said all the shit purpled was saying when he was eating pizza scrolls but with my hand in my mouth.

also victor sarafin was named after viktor arcane on account of me watching arcane when i was writing this chapter… so plz feel free to imagine the man who made blue being a twink scientist. also arcane is very good. You should watch it.

ALSO. loose update plan is about every fortnight (bi-weekly or every two weeks for people who do not use the word fortnightly because I found out recently that is more of an australianism/british english thing). SO SEE YOU IN TWO WEEKS POOKIES <3

histories

Chapter Summary

When Tommy was six he wanted nothing more than to be loved.

or, 648,532 words, two main fics and three side fics later. we find out why tina!tommy's powers are built so different

Chapter Notes

welcome to, what i believe is one of the saddest and most horrific things i've written (to me specifically, idk if the general population will find it sad OR horrific). I listened to ‘Six Hundred Strike’ (from Epic) and ‘St Chroma’ a lot while writing this chapter. I think it shows.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Tommy was six he wanted nothing more than to be loved.

He still remembers it, that young boy clawing for love and affection. The way he’d try and dig his fingers into any semblance of love he was given— the way that he’d cling onto kind words from neighbours and friends and the parents of friends he made at school.

Sometimes he thinks there’s not that much difference between that six-year-old who just wanted to know love and who he becomes later on.

There’s areas of Logstedchire that were ravaged by blue when Tommy had been a child, of both types and other types that people made soon after. No one from the area really likes to talk about it.

Whispers of heroes and the money they made followed Tommy around as a child. How could they not? People were hungry— had been hungry for decades and in the distance was a shimmering shining tower that loomed over them all, that had long abandoned the people here.

Tommy doesn’t remember the vigilantes of Logstedchire well, he was *so* young when they mattered. He just remembers the abandonment felt when they were gone, he was too young to understand what was going on but he remembers his parents talking about it in hushed tones, about the gangs taking over again.

And so… soon afterwards blue became a big deal again—

When Tommy was twelve he learnt that the saying ‘pull yourself up by your bootstraps’ originally was a phrase used to describe a task that was impossible. It would later be taken over by people who insisted hard work is something that’s able to get you out of anything—everything.

Which of course, anyone with a brain knows is a lie.

However, for a while the people in Logstedchire found a way to pull themselves up by their bootstraps.

At a great risk of course—

But Logstedchire clings onto survival, they cling onto what they can get. Tommy at least lived his whole life in risk, he has no reason to believe his parents didn’t as well. The thing about clinging onto something is that you’re not willing to let it go, almost no matter the cost.

Sometimes Tommy almost forgives his parents because of it.

Other times he wishes he could be the one to kill them again.

He’s not sure if he can blame them for all that happened to him, he wants to. More than anything in the world he wants to blame his parents for it all, but the older he gets the more he starts to understand and then he hates that he understands and then he hates his parents more for it.

Tommy knows they did their best, he also knows that was nowhere near good enough and they betrayed him more times than he can count. He understands why they did what they did.

That doesn’t mean he’ll ever forgive them.

On the medical floor Techno gets a few moments to relax, relax is probably a strong word but it does mean he gets to vent about his life to his best friend.

Overall, things are good.

“It just feels like whatever I say to him I’m fucking it up,” Techno murmurs, phone pressed against his ear, “he’s being needlessly stubborn about this— and it’s information that if he’s right is science-breaking.”

Aimsey is sitting on one of the hospital beds as a medic looks at their nose, Sniff is talking rapidly to another one of the medics, doing hand motions which mean they’re trying to explain how their powers work.

“Tommy’s always been stubborn,” Niki says gently, amusement in her voice, “he’s like you.”

Techno rolls his eyes, “yeah Logstedchire does that to a person… I just don’t know how to talk to him about this, it’s clearly something that needs to be addressed but I just don’t…”

“Let him come to you,” Niki says, with the most reasonable and responsible adult advice Techno has heard in a while.

“Then I’ll never fucking know—”

“Then it’s not that important—”

“You clearly have not met him.”

Niki sighs, “I have. I have been there for some of his worst moments and I know that he’ll tell you if he thinks it’s important. He might not think it’s important when it is, and that’s a whole other problem to address, all you can do is be a stable person for him to go to. You’re not the only person he has.”

“I know. I just worry about him.”

That makes Niki snort with laughter, “every day you sound a little more like a dad.”

“I’m good—”

“TECHNO!” Aimsey yells, “SNIFF TOOK MY PHONE!”

It’s loud enough for Niki to hear because she starts laughing, near hysterically.

“They are full grown adults,” Techno says into the phone, “I can not articulate this enough that they are fully adults,” he holds the phone away from his face looking at the two of them, “Aimsey you have superpowers get it back yourself.”

Niki laughs again, “I’m glad to see Aimsey is doing well.”

“Come visit her yourself,” Techno turns around to ignore the fighting Sniff and Aimsey are doing in the background, “they’re both doing well, Aimsey’s powers are getting stronger and stronger every day, it’s really impressive.”

“I’d expect nothing less,” Niki decides.

Techno can *hear* the smile in her voice from the other side of the phone.

“I might check in later— I have a couple of things I need to do today, including taking Floof on a walk. He’s been real fidgety lately.”

“I expect nothing less,” Techno laughs, “well— come in later if you’re about that. I’ll be here because I’m always here—”

There’s a noise and the door slides open.

Phil walks in, shaking out his wings before giving Sniff and Aimsey a small wave.

Sniff stops holding Aimsey’s phone above their head and hands their phone back. Aimsey nudges her in the ribs way too hard, Sniff whacks Aimsey in the shoulder.

With amusement Phil watches the two of the

“Okay, I have work to do,” Techno says, “take Floof for a walk and swing around, Kristin will let you in— bring Floof too. Bye.”

“See you!”

Techno shoves his phone back in his pocket as Phil crosses the room to stand in front of him, arms crossed and eyes scanning around slightly.

“You need something Phil?” Techno asks.

Sniff and Aimsey resume their squabbling behind him.

“I’m sure you have enough on your plate already,” Phil says very desperately trying to suppress his laughter, “but have you seen Tommy?”

“Uh— he was with Daniel last, he’s been avoiding me so it’s a mystery wherever he is.”

Phil pulls a face, “he’s avoiding you?”

And Techno doesn’t really know how to get into it, that Tommy is avoiding a difficult conversation they’re going to have to have eventually. No matter how much Techno respects Tommy’s boundaries and privacy, someone isn’t just allowed to say— *‘oh yeah by the way blue powers my powers’* and then proceed to not elaborate.

So he opens and closes his mouth for a few moments, as Phil looks increasingly concerned the longer it takes for him to respond.

“Are you two doing alright?” Phil asks, with his general Phil-esque kindness and concern.

Techno is an adult now, he is a full grown adult and has been for many years. There’s something about the concerned™ voice that Phil still does that makes Techno feel like a child again. Something about that voice throws him back into the past when he was fourteen and so angry at the world he would’ve torn it apart with his bare hands just to feel a little bit better.

But Techno… is not fourteen anymore, he is an adult with a job— he is an adult who trained a vigilante to be less angry at the world and is now training two heroes to be less angry at the world.

“Uh,” is what Techno decides on saying.

Eloquence has always been his strength.

Clearly.

Phil somehow manages to look more concerned.

“We just got into an argument,” Techno shrugs, “well— he kind of just yelled at me, but for us that counts as a fight. What did you need him for anyway?”

“Oh, just a question about a press release I’m doing in a couple of days… really surprisingly, The Blade, Osteon and Zephyrus were seen in Logstedchire despite it not being in their allocated patrol route.”

Sniff and Aimsey glance at each other.

“Doesn’t sound like something Osteon would do,” Sniff says.

“Zephyrus would *never* do that,” Aimsey holds a hand against their chest.

Phil’s eyes flick back to Techno, “and as their mentor do you have a response to that?”

Techno crosses his arms, “we were going to an area that actually needed it.”

“Crime rates in Logstedchire are the lowest they’ve ever been.”

“Yeah— because no one is reporting crimes to the police. Because no one can get to the police station because they’ll arrest anyone trying to report a crime because they were out after curfew.”

Phil sighs, “then they shouldn’t be out after curfew—”

Sniff inhales sharply and Techno holds a hand up.

“Crimes happen in the home,” Techno takes a deep breath, “and have you ever tried to tell someone from Logstedchire what to do ever— I know you have because you raised me through my teenage years and you know Daniel Greyson and Thomas Underscore.”

Phil takes a deep breath, “yeah, okay. If you’re gonna do that please just don’t get caught. There’s only so long I can cover for all three of you— the vigilantes probably have it covered in Logstedchire.”

“They’re busy with protests,” there’s something in Sniff’s tone that screams *‘try me’* , Techno recognises it from his own voice, “and we’re doing the job we’re paid to do, you know, to protect the weak and vulnerable. Logstedchire is full of vulnerable groups *especially* when they can’t report crimes happening at night because they’ll be arrested for reporting crimes— and that’s before we even start considering how shit and useless the police are in Logstedchire and that everyone and their fucking mother hates them!”

Phil blinks a few times, he sighs, “okay. My point still stands, if you’re going to do it, stop getting caught.”

Next to him, Techno is aware of Sniff.

The way that Sniff’s posture is starting to change, she likes Phil, Techno knows that. But she likes yelling at dumb people even more. Their shoulders set back and Techno can see the side of their frown.

“Are you ever going to stop being a little bitch?” Sniff snarls, “or are you going to be a coward because of Nelson-Jones? Bending to his every whim because of what— are you

fucking afraid of him?”

And Techno can feel his chest starting to get warm from this. The heat rises until it’s uncomfortable—

Until it’s burning hot.

Techno looks down.

Hanging around his neck is the matching pair of the necklace he gave Tommy— seven months ago at this point.

And it’s burning against his chest.

Tommy’s in trouble.

Tommy’s in serious fucking trouble.

Vaguely he’s aware of Sniff and Phil arguing, it sounds more like buzzing in his head as panic threatens to take over. Tommy’s in trouble. *Tommy’s in trouble,* trouble bad enough he broke his necklace.

The last resort.

He fumbles for his phone, sure enough the ping on it is open.

Stairwell.

He’s in the stairwell.

And Techno takes off, he’s aware of Sniff, Aimsey and Phil yelling something behind him as Techno runs as fast as he is able to.

He tears out of the MedBay, door flying off the hinges and clattering onto the ground as he rounds the corner towards the stairwell.

There’s a flash of red next to him and Aimsey is by his side, xe throws their arm out in front of them and the door to the stairwell flings open, smashing against the wall. Techno takes a few more steps until he’s at the edge of the stairwell, hands curled around the edge of the railing.

He scans down first because that’s easier.

No one.

He scans up, just on the edge of one of the floors he can see Tommy’s hand hanging off the edge.

Fuck .

“I have to go up,” Techno says.

Aimsey peers up over the railing too before nodding their head, they pull backwards away from the railing before summoning energy in her hands. The red energy starts to spill out of his hands in red tendrils.

One wraps around Techno's leg, another around his arm.

Aimsey takes a deep breath, reels their arm back before throwing it forwards.

Then Techno is soaring through the air, he doesn't even have time to be impressed with Aimsey before his hands are curling around the edge of the railing of the stairwell.

Tommy is on the ground, blood pouring from the back of his head and eyes staring up into the ceiling. Where his face is digging into one of the stairs there's a red mark on his cheek that's going to bruise something incredible—

Techno's entire body turns ice cold.

Tommy is still. His eyes are open. Techno doesn't know if he's breathing or not—

Standing next to Tommy, still slightly crouched is—

Sam Warren.

Of. Fucking. Course.

He stares at Techno with wide eyes, pure, unrestrained fear in his eyes.

Techno has done a very good job at restraining his anger for years, learning from Phil and Niki and even Floof are all parts of how and why he's learnt how to control himself. He hasn't been in a blinding rage for years— the last time was probably when he was nineteen.

But there's something about seeing Tommy still with his eyes wide open— maybe dead— *he can't be dead* , on the ground that just snaps something in Techno's head.

And it's not even the hot, blinding, seething rage.

It's a dull acceptance of what needs to happen.

Sam Warren needs to die.

It's a fact as clear as day. Sam needs to die, and Techno is the one who is going to do it.

Techno hauls himself over the edge of the railing, landing on solid ground before throwing his full weight at Sam.

He crashes into Sam and the two of them fall to the ground in a tangled mess of limbs, Techno doesn't waste another second before slamming his fist into Sam's face. Something breaks under his hand but Techno doesn't care.

With his other hand he grabs Sam by the hair before slamming his head down on the ground, it makes a thump that echoes throughout the stairwell. He lifts Sam's head up again to slam it back into the edge of the stair but—

Tommy makes a small noise.

It's not a word, it's not even a cry, it's more of a whimper.

It still manages to get Techno to whip his head over to Tommy.

Oh, yeah… Tommy .

He immediately drops his hand from Sam's hair, he has a sneaking suspicion that Sam isn't going anywhere anytime soon. He scrambles off of Sam and right next to Tommy, knees slamming into the ground next to him.

Tommy is still staring up with wide unseeing eyes, he's breathing in and out though.

"Hey, hey," Techno puts his hand behind Tommy's head, cradling it from the stairs that was digging into the back of his head and face. His hand is immediately covered in the sticky blood from the back of Tommy's head, "Tommy— come on kid."

He taps Tommy's cheek with his other hand, not quite a slap but nearing it.

"Hey, talk to me, you're really scaring me."

Tommy doesn't say anything else, and sometimes Techno finds Tommy annoying and thinks he talks too much about nothing but *fuck* Techno's missing his voice— even if it's Tommy talking about how he could take a crocodile in a fight which he couldn't and—

"Kid," Techno shakes him a little, "what the fuck is happening—"

That's when an arc of red lightning dances out of Tommy's hand and hits Techno in the arm.

Techno yells from the pain, grasping his arm with his other hand, he stares down at Tommy. Breathing. He's still breathing— everything is as fine as it can be if Tommy keeps breathing.

He pulls up his own hoodie sleeve, where the bolt hit is a singed spot in the fabric and then a burn that zigzags out like lightning from where it hit. It's not overly big, just taking up a small section of his arm but—

Fuck.

This is not good.

"Tommy," Techno taps his face again, "come on kid, you're not giving me a lot to work here I don't know how to fix you."

Tommy doesn't give him an answer—

Techno's eyes start scanning around the area, there's blood and there's the shards of Tommy's necklace that he broke and—

There's a vial of something.

In the vial are tiny blue droplets.

No.

Nonono.

Techno's entire body locks up, his elbows and shoulders as he stares down at Tommy. His eyes are glassy and wide— he's not looking at anything in particular. His mouth is moving but he's not saying anything and he's breathing but it's uneven and uncertain and—

Sam stabbed Tommy with Blue.

A lot of it, if this is anything to go by.

Tommy's drugged.

And Tommy needs a doctor— right now— a minute ago— maybe even before that. He is not transforming into anything on Techno's watch, he just… refuses for it to happen, he's not going to watch Tommy go through half of what he had to go through at the hands of blue.

"You're gonna be fine, kid," Techno promises, voice wavering at the end.

He scoops Tommy up in his arms and starts sprinting down the stairs towards the medical floor.

Tubbo feels himself get rolled onto his back, it's hard to understate how much he hurts. His ribs are fucked up.

On his burn side he can feel warm liquid, before very cleverly figuring out that it's blood.

Staring down at him are bright yellow eyes.

Tubbo actually screams.

The person hovering above him jumps back, and somewhere Tubbo is distantly reminded of a cat.

Tubbo sits up before pain shoots through the left side of his ribs and he collapses back onto the floor.

"That's probably a pretty good idea," the voice says and Tubbo jumps again, "hello, bom dia — I'm still here."

“Portuguese?” Tubbo manages instead of having any actual rational thoughts, “who— what —”

“Oh, I’m sorry that was kind of… super rude of me,” once again bright yellow glowing eyes pop into view. The man himself looks— not super young but not super old, maybe in his late twenties? Early thirties? Tubbo doesn’t fucking know.

He has freakishly bright yellow eyes that are very literally glowing. Choppy black hair that severely varies in length, but is generally shorter around his face and longer in the back. It is very much showing a man who hasn’t seen himself in a mirror for— far too long.

Like Tubbo he is wearing a sky blue jumpsuit. His is tied around his waist showing a black singlet underneath. While not particularly muscular the man doesn’t look particularly weak either, he clearly has some muscle.

Twig-Arms Tubbo probably shouldn’t get on his bad side.

“My name is Pac.”

“Like Pacman?”

“Sure.”

“Did your parents hate you?” and Tubbo is immediately getting on the bad side of the man who is significantly stronger than him. Good move.

“Yes, but that was unrelated to the whole Pac thing, y’know?”

Tubbo does not know.

“Anyway— who are *you* ? What powers do you have? Why are you here?”

Tubbo slides a hand along his ribcage, it feels more like a bruise and less like a break. While that isn’t *ideal* it is better than nothing. Tubbo takes a deep breath, eyes darting back up at Pac.

“Tubbo. None. Pissing off William Nelson-Jones by telling him his stupid fucking empire he built for himself will fall.”

And Pac’s face does something very, very complicated for a second. If Tubbo’s brain was working he might’ve been able to read Pac’s expression slightly. Instead, Tubbo tries to turn and pain shoots through his side again.

With a hiss Tubbo lays back flat on his back.

“William Nelson-Jones?” Pac repeats.

“What? Yes— the worst fucking guy alive, what about it?”

Pac crouches on the ground next to Tubbo, “just because you said that you get this—”

Panic quickly rises in Tubbo's throat, he goes to sit up and lash out at Pac as Pac reaches out with one of his hands, "get the fuck away from me you—"

Then a wash of relief comes over Tubbo, his ribs aren't aching anymore

"Huh," is what Tubbo says.

Pac just smiles at him, he wiggles his fingers in front of his face, "powers."

"I… I gathered that much," Tubbo slowly sits up, his hands ghost over his side. The bruise is still clearly there if Tubbo presses on it, but it's dulled, like he's been given panadol or— something a lot better than panadol, "do you limit the effect Cyclooxygenase-2 has on producing prostaglandins?"

Pac just blinks at him a few times, "um… pardon?"

"Prostaglandin is the chemical made when you're hurt, painkillers normally target Cyclooxygenase-2 and stops it from making prostaglandin."

Pac keeps staring at him blankly, "while that sounds interesting," he says in a tone which means he doesn't find any of that interesting and would rather put a knife through his skull than listen to it again, "I just kinda— y'know, wiggle my fingers and my friends don't hurt anymore."

Tubbo shuffles back until his back is resting against the wall, "you have friends? Do you write letters to them?"

Pac laughs, "no, no, that would be *silly* , I just project messages into their minds."

"I have no clue if you're joking or not."

"Guess you'll have to find out," Pac says with a grin.

Tubbo's hand skirts back around to his ribs, he carefully pushes two fingers into the bruise and winces. He moves his hand and does it again, and then again. The bruise seems to take up the entire left side of his ribs.

His breathing is a bit laboured from the pain that comes with breathing in, but otherwise it's not wheezy in the way it would be if anything in his lungs were pierced. He takes another deep breath just to know he can.

It hurts a little, but the hurt is dulled.

With a sigh Tubbo leans his head back against the wall.

The room he is in is… pretty sad, which is to be expected. Tubbo wasn't expecting *luxury* in Pandora's or anything but this is some fucking bullshit.

To his left is the orange forcefield that seems to cap off every cell. The forcefield shimmers with some sort of orange liquid. There are a few sources that the forcefield extends out of

littered around the edge of it. Metal caps of some kind that seem to have some sort of— *something* in it. It's slightly translucent, Tubbo can't make out *much* on the other side of the forcefield, but he knows there is something on the other side of this.

Tubbo can't tell the make or design of the sources or the orange forcefield, he would bet his life on some sort of netherite being involved in it, otherwise it is probably some fucking confusing silence. He'd have to get closer or maybe even touch it and right now that seems like an exceptionally poor plan, even for him.

The room itself is incredibly small, there are two beds pushed in either corner of the room with some relatively thin blankets and pillows thrown over it. The one on the opposite side of the room seems to be Pac's, with one slightly more personal blanket thrown in there. In the right corner of the room closest to the forcefield is a little camera that points across the room.

Tubbo zones in on the camera, it's a make he recognises. It's also a DVR camera, which feels like an incredibly poor choice. Surely in a prison an NVR camera is preferred? It's not like Tubbo's going to critique it, having all the footage on a hard drive could prove to be *incredibly* fucking useful if they need to destroy it.

Between the two beds is a metal door.

"Private bathrooms?"

Pac nods.

"Well— that's nicer than I thought it would be," Tubbo's eyes drift up to the ceiling again and he sighs, "but then… what's so… bad here? I mean private bathrooms are nice and all but—"

"Oh, the experiments," Pac sighs.

"What the fuck do you mean— the experiments."

"You'll probably get off lucky because you don't have any powers, they experiment on weakening powers here," Pac wiggles his fingers again, "my powers used to be a lot stronger, now I do sad little things like make pain slightly less bad. I used to be able to regrow limbs!"

"… how do you find that out?"

Pac just smiles at him, revealing a row of *incredibly* sharp teeth.

Alright… Pac is stronger than him and has teeth that look primed for tearing out a jugular.

Nice.

"The guards can also be a bit—" Pac tilts his head from side to side, "don't get on their bad side. The other inmates are mostly nice but a couple are a bit— ehhhh, I wouldn't like… *recommend* fucking with them, but you seem pretty smart. I'm sure you can take care of yourself and *not* get clobbered in the face!"

“I’m kinda a smartass,” Tubbo sighs, “I’m going to get beat up.”

“Well… don’t do that!”

“Thanks!” Tubbo copies the cheery tone Pac is using on him.

“Oh also… if you’re in Pandora’s they expect you to die here.”

“I knew that much.”

Pac looks at Tubbo like he is genuinely stupid, “… meaning… so the prison doesn’t like… reach capacity they may be willing to just… y’know, let you die.”

Tubbo’s mouth fully falls open, “they euthanise people?”

“Oh, no, no, no,” Pac shakes his head, “that’s *far* too kind. Sometimes guards blackmail inmates to beat each other up until they die, sometimes the experiments go wrong and people die. They need to have— what’s the word— oh yeah, plausible deniability.”

“So… we leave the cell for meal times? Is that allowed?”

“It wasn’t when I first came here,” Pac explains, “but the guards got all—”

“Obsessed about having power trips over prisoners?”

“Yep!”

The two of them fall into an awkward-not-quite-awkward silence as the both of them don’t have anything else to say.

Which means a slow realisation starts to settle into Tubbo’s bones. They are doing… beyond unethical actions here, they are beyond doing crimes. Pandora’s is dangerous— and Tubbo knew that but in the way that he knows moose can dive underwater.

Now he’s here, in Pandora’s, being told about how dangerous it is. So many people die here. Tubbo could very well be the next one.

And all the confidence he had about this slowly melts away inside his body, all the adrenaline and spite that’s been keeping him going for days— hours— Tubbo doesn’t even know how long it’s been. Everything keeping him going and breathing and sarcastic at the face of *William Nelson-Jones himself* , drains out of his body. Until all that is left is a sinking feeling in his stomach.

There’s a very real possibility he’s going to die here, from an infection or a guard who decides he has a vendetta against him and it’s *not fair.* Tubbo survived his parents and working in fighting rings and he survived helping vigilantes and he survived all of this just to die in jail where he was thrown to rot.

And worst of all… he’s scared.

He's scared in a way he hasn't been since he was a very young child, scared in the way that makes it hard to breathe and scared in the way that makes his hands start shaking.

And Tubbo doesn't know a lot about jail, but he knows that you're not supposed to cry in front of your cellmates, or anyone. He tucks his legs up to his chest before resting his forehead on his knees as he tries to fight away the tears.

He's not going to cry, he is not going to paint a target on his back with his *cellmate* that quickly.

"Hey, hey, hey," Pac says gently from across the room.

There's the sound of fabric rustling, then Pac taking a few steps across the room before crouching in front of Tubbo.

"You're gonna be okay, Tubbo."

Tubbo just shakes his head, trying to keep the tears from falling. He's mostly successful but a few manage to slide off his face. He wipes his eyes with the back of his hand and presses his lips together— he is *not* going to start sobbing.

"No, you *are* going to be okay, Tubbo, I promise it."

"You can't—" Tubbo grits his teeth, "you can't fucking promise that and you know it. I'm going to die here, you're going to die here! We're both going to die here and it's not fucking fair! It's not— it's not fair, it's not fair that so many people do so many awful things everyday and I'm the one that's ended up here, that's not— that's— all the heroes have to do to be put in the Hall of Heroes, or whatever the fuck, is die— and I— I'm just left here to rot because I fucking did the right thing!"

He shakes his head again, resting his forehead back against his knees.

"People smarter than you survive Pandora's," Pac says gently, "I can't promise you that you'll be alright, but I can promise you I'll do everything I can to make sure you're alright."

Tubbo just looks up at him, blinking away tears, "that makes no sense."

Pac just gives an awkward half-smile, "I'd want someone to do the same for my son."

"You have a son?"

"Mhm," Pac nods but there's something strained in his expression— in his eyes. He stops crouching in front of Tubbo and instead sits down, "Richarlyson, I think he would be about twelve now."

"When did— when did you last see him?"

"About ten years ago," Pac whispers, "time is so hard to keep track of here. It's all melded into one."

“I’m— I’m so sorry.”

Pac just gives the shortest smile he is able to, it’s beyond strained. Pac moves so he’s sitting next to Tubbo, staring at the same wall Tubbo is.

“It’s not all bad,” Pac says, “I know he’s taken care of!

“Girlfriend?”

Pac turns to look at him, mouth slightly open.

“That’s heteronormative of me, sorry. Partner?”

“I— that would be one word for it… I guess. We were roommates.”

And there’s a lot of things Tubbo could say to that, that the look on Pac’s face doesn’t scream *totally platonic roommates* , it more screams *hopelessly in love* , but they’re both in prison and it feels a little bit pointless to point it out now.

Tubbo takes a deep breath, it only pangs his ribs a little bit.

“Well, we have to get you back to Richarlyson,” Tubbo nudges Pac in the side of the ribs with his elbow.

Pac laughs. It’s not a happy laugh.

Tubbo leans his head back against the wall, scrubbing at his eyes.

Sometimes in the agonising depths of pain Tommy’s mum would tell him stories. She would sit Tommy on her lap as Tommy sobbed and ran her fingers through his hair, scratching his scalp and telling him stories.

Tommy knew about pirates and superheroes and princesses and fairies and so many stories made up when it all hurt too much. Some days, months after the incidents it would still hurt so badly that Tommy could barely think.

His mum would let him lay on her lap and tell him soft stories.

His favourites were about superheroes, about the brave things they did and the people they saved.

“Once upon a time there was a little hero named… Tommy!”

“Woah, that’s my name!”

“That it is, my love. Tommy was the best hero in the entire world. He really, really liked to save people and he was very, very good at it. Everyone all throughout L’Manberg loved Tommy the hero.

“What about Tommy the boy, Mama?”

“What do you mean, my dear?”

“Well…” Tommy remembers saying, he still had his baby teeth back then, some would later be knocked out from when he was punched in the mouth, “everyone loves Tommy the hero, but what about Tommy the boy? Do his parents love him very much? Does Logsted— Log-gesture-sheer love him?”

“This Tommy isn’t from Logstedchire,” his mum would whisper into the side of his head, “this Tommy is from a place where there are… parties and… fancy lollies and… unicorns and rainbows.”

“Woah,” Tommy remembers saying, thinking of all of those things. Of the luxuries that had never been afforded to him, of the luxuries that would later be afforded to him when he got older, “that sounds pretty cool. How’d he get there?”

“Hmm…” his mum pretended to think about it, hands still running through Tommy’s hair, “he drank a magic potion.”

“Woah.”

“A magical potion that transported him to this place.”

“With parties?”

“ *So, so, so,* so many parties. All with dinosaur piñatas.”

“WOAH!”

Sometimes amongst the stories everything felt fuzzy. It felt nice, like a part of Tommy could remove himself from well… himself, it always hurt less then. Thinking about Tommy the Hero in a far off land made it easier, in that memory he can barely remember the hurt. He knows it was there the same way he knows that when he was a baby he would cry, intuition rather than the memory of it.

And right now Tommy is aware that it feels like his nerves are trying to tear away from his fucking body. It hurts, so, so badly, but in the fuzzy dull way. The way that pressing on a bruise in the morning does, the feeling of hurt that comes from sleeping wrong.

Everything is fuzzy, not quite here. It’s ridiculously gentle. A dream being melded across Tommy’s brain, fuzzy and not quite concrete, slipping away whenever Tommy tries to grasp it.

It’s nice. Peaceful. Gentle.

It feels like a hug or a sigh and so many other things of softness he was never awarded.

Then, like all moments of reprieve Tommy gets. It’s shattered.

The fuzziness is shattered by a blinding pain that fractures at his skull and in his eyes and all down his body and it hurts, it hurts— *fuck* it all hurts so badly.

He screams.

It is muffled by the ringing of the pain in his body. He screams hoping someone gets it because it's hurt for so long and he is so tired of it hurting, it eats away at him and Tommy doesn't think he has enough left to eat away at.

He screams for his mum.

She never saved him back then either.

Jostling Tommy is far from ideal. Techno's a hero, he has fairly comprehensive first aid training. Meaning he knows that jostling Tommy is at risk of giving him a concussion, or him choking on his own vomit depending on how things go.

He also knows he needs to get Tommy to a medical professional as fast as possible to make sure he's not going to hybrid transform on them all.

Techno is beyond panicking, he's ticked back over into being so panicked that his brain has shut down and he's calm again. Tommy is going to be fine, Tommy is always fine.

And maybe if Tommy was unconscious or something maybe Techno could stay calmer.

But Tommy is just staring.

Eyes completely blank.

Coming up the stairs are Aimsey, Sniff and Phil flying through the otherwise empty middle of the stairwell, the thing that's the straight shot up through most of the tower. At a time like this Techno would wonder if Phil sometimes divebombs down here.

They all see Tommy, limp in Techno's grasp at the same time. Aimsey's eyes go wide, Phil looks horrified and something in Sniff's gaze hardens.

"Move, move, move," Techno says as he approaches them on the stairs.

Out of instinct Sniff moves out of the way and Aimsey tries to shuffle to the side but is red from exertion.

"What— what happened to Tommy?" Aimsey says through wheezing breaths.

"He's been blued," Sniff whispers, in something more than horror, "his eyes—" she grabs Aimsey by the back of the shirt and pulls them out of the way.

Techno glances up at Phil, "arrest Sam for attempted murder— or— something, I don't know. There's at least one empty blue vial up there. He stabbed Tommy with it, I know he did. Please— if you've never trusted me—"

“Of course I trust you,” Phil says, as easy as breathing before taking back off into the air to fly through the middle of the stairwell, “Sniff and Aimsey come with—”

Techno is already down several more stairs when Phil gives the order.

If things were slightly different Techno might spider hop his way down but he is not risking Tommy like that. He looks at Tommy, his eyes are still blank and unseeing. He’s still breathing, although it’s coming out as harsher and harsher wheezes.

Tommy’s entire body convulses in Techno’s arms and Techno feels a burn shoot through his arms.

He stumbles, tripping over his own foot.

He nearly drops Tommy, before managing to get his footing again.

He ignores the burning feeling that dances through his body as he does it. Techno is more than strong enough to hold Tommy, more parts of the fabric of Techno’s hoodie are singed.

Tommy’s body convulses again, and Techno this time is slightly more ready for it.

And that’s when Tommy starts screaming.

Ear-splitting shrieks that Techno has never come from Tommy before.

“Mama!” he screams, “make it stop— it hurts, make it stop, please, please.”

Techno holds Tommy slightly closer to his chest as he uses his shoulder to slam open the door that leads to the stairwell.

“Help!” Tommy screams and Techno can very quickly feel the tears start to well in his own eyes.

There are two medical floors in the tower— one for the heroes on the forty-second level, and one for staff or even the public on level twenty-eight.

If they deny Tommy care because he isn’t a hero, Techno is genuinely going to throw someone out of a window.

The door is already off its hinges from before when Techno runs from the relatively small hallway connecting the stairwell to the hospital floor.

Several people look at Techno and Tommy when they burst in, Aimsey only a few steps behind.

Healers in training, a few nurses and doctors, a hero is sitting on one of the beds getting patched up. Techno doesn’t remember who the fuck it is, he honestly doesn’t care a lot to find out who it is.

“He’s been injected with blue!” Techno calls out to the room.

Everyone snaps into action.

Techno rushes to the first available hospital bed, cradling the back of Tommy's head and placing him onto the bed as gently as he can. Several healers and nurses immediately are by Tommy's bedside, eyes scanning over him.

"Make it stop," Tommy murmurs, slurred and barely put together, "make it— it hurts so badly, make it stop please—"

"Does he have any hybrid parentage?" someone asks and Techno's head whips up away from Tommy towards them.

"Uh— his parents are Avians on his file," Techno breathes, "I don't know if that's relevant— he's had contact with type two blue but that was months ago I don't know if that's out of his system or not I just don't—"

The movement and talking and shouting around Tommy is overwhelming, someone hooking him up to an IV as someone else takes another vial of blood. Someone is working on the back of Tommy's head and other injuries and Techno completely forgot about those. He's such a shit person.

Someone immediately draws blood out of Tommy's arm.

Techno just watches—

What else can he do?

One of the healers clasp his shoulder, and Techno tears his eyes away from Tommy for a moment to look at the. They have relatively short black hair around their chin, wearing thick rimmed glasses and the typical healer's uniform.

"If he does have the other type of blue in his system we still have a couple of hours before anything transpires," they say with what he knows is supposed to be a supportive smile.

Techno's eyes dart back to Tommy, where a healer is standing next to him, hand on his forehead.

"We'll check if he has that other type in his system and we'll check for any potential hybrid genetics, either preexisting or starting to develop now. You said you found him shortly after the injection?"

"Yeah— I think so, it's been a couple minutes at most. Is he at risk of overdosing?"

"If he wasn't brought here, then yes," the healer says, "are you aware of any hybrid history?"

"No. That doesn't mean he doesn't have it though, he's... not open about stuff like that."

The healer just nods, "that won't be a problem— we have to wait a little bit to get the results. If he hasn't had the other type and it's not in his system then we'll treat this like a regular

drug case. If he has and if we think he's at risk of transforming then there's a few things we can do…"

"Like?"

The healer sighs, suddenly looking a lot more tired, "a few experimental things have been shown to show success, a lot of those are experimental. That would probably be a decision made by the next of kin… if you know who that would be?"

Does… does Tommy have a next of kin?

He should considering how fucking dangerous him being alive is.

It's probably Purpled or himself right?

That's probably a bold decision.

"Uh— if he has one I reckon it would be me or his best friend."

The healer just nods, "well if you could contact that friend and let them know what's going on."

"Yeah… yeah, yup— are you sure there's nothing we can do for Tommy—"

"His vitals are being monitored for anything irregular, because the drugs were injected directly into his bloodstream there is not a lot we can do to get them out, we have a healer working on it though. We also can't do much until the blood results come back. Call his best friend."

Techno keeps his eyes on Tommy as he fumbles for his phone in his pocket.

Tommy is relatively still, things strapped and stuck onto him to monitor his breathing and pulse. He has a bandage clumsily wrapped around the back of his head, probably holding some sort of material to catch the blood from the back of his head.

The side of his face is starting to bruise, the red mark is starting to fade into something darker. He's saying something again and again, his eyes screwed shut, it's too quiet to hear but Techno would bet his entire life savings on it being something about how badly it's hurting right now.

A chair is pulled up next to Techno, and the healer from before gives him a short smile.

Techno finds himself on the chair immediately, scrambling to get his phone out of his pocket. He needs to contact Purpled.

He goes straight to calling, Techno isn't the type of person who calls many people— especially not Purpled. He hopes this gets across how *oh shit we are in a not good situation* this entire thing is.

Then the phone rings and rings.

Nothing.

“Hey it’s Daniel… just text me you freak why are you calling me—”

The beep for the voicemail goes.

“Hey kid,” Techno sighs into the phone, “Tommy’s pretty fucked up— I don’t want to talk about what happened through phone or text… but it might be really bad. Someone’s been arrested— I’m sure you can guess who…”

It’s not like Purpled to leave work early.

“Let me know if you’re alright.”

Techno leans back into the seat pulled up by Tommy’s bedside, there’s a nurse and a healer talking in hissed voices about experimental treatments and Techno really feels the urge to pull his hair out of his head—

Phil sweeps into the room, giving someone a polite smile before his eyes lock onto Techno. Aimsey and Sniff are flanking him, with Aimsey holding his hand to his chest—

Sniff grabs Aimsey, slowly leading them over to one of the nurses as Phil approaches him.

“You nearly killed Sam,” Phil says.

“Only nearly? I was trying to kill him.”

Phil takes a deep breath through his nose, “Techno—”

“Oh, I’m sorry, is trying to kill an attempted child murderer *not* acceptable? Sorry, I’ll get right on that.”

Phil grabs another chair from against the wall, pulling it up next to Techno. He sits on it backwards, arms hugging around the backrest on it so he doesn’t have to fold his wings up against the chair.

Techno huffs, leaning back in his chair.

“We found someone else further up the stairs, one of William Nelson-Jones’s employees, Fred. We’re pretty sure he was behind the situation.”

Great— an innocent person got dragged into all of this.

“No one would blame you for how you interpreted it,” Phil says, “you and Sam have never gotten along and I probably would’ve thought the same—”

Techno’s head whips towards Phil, “you don’t believe me.”

“I…” Phil sighs running a hand through his hair, “I have a hard time thinking of why *Sam* would want to *kill* Tommy. And why wouldn't he have just been helping Tommy after

someone else did it."

Techno's jaw fully falls open, "I'm sorry? Why would a random employee want Tommy dead? Because that makes way more sense than *Sam* ."

"Look," Phil takes another deep breath, "I… be careful."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"It means, Sam is Nelson-Jones's favourite. Sam is the most likely one to go onto the hero committee soon. I— I don't not believe you, I trust you and you're generally right about things like this. I— I also know that acting too rashly right now could end really badly for you—"

Techno opens his mouth.

"And Tommy," Phil adds, "Sam is seen as a very important hero to how this tower runs. He creates a lot of our gear, he manages a bunch of patrol routes in Upper L'Manberg and the Prime District… they know you and Sam have a past history and have never gotten along, and have no fucking clue why Sam would do *this* to our public relations guy."

"I should've killed him."

"Techno!"

"No you don't—" Techno balls his hands into fists and then unballs them again, he takes another deep breath, "I hate him— I mean that. The type of hatred that almost made me kill a politician when I was fourteen, the type of hatred I had in the fighting rings? That's what I have for Sam. I hate him, if he died I'd fucking dance on his grave. He's just— weird towards Tommy and Daniel, they don't like him and… he's been so awful to me the entire time I've been here. He knows I'm a threat to him."

Phil leans forwards over his chair a little bit more, "look… I don't know what's going to happen here."

"Sam's going to get away with it," Techno watches Phil's face closely for any snippet of emotion.

Phil's face just becomes so tired and so, so resigned. He nods a few times before giving another sigh, "probably. The same way you'll get away with nearly beating Sam to death."

"He's in hospital, right?"

"Sniff and I took him to the hospital downstairs… figured if he was rushed in here he wouldn't be alive much longer."

Techno manages a small laugh out of that, "yeah…" his eyes flick back to Tommy. He's stopped saying things, one of the nurses is looking at all of his vitals— which from what Techno can see are as good as can be expected.

Aimsey shuffles back over, not with a bandage wrapped around their hand.

“—can’t tuck your thumb in,” Sniff says before air boxing a few times.

“Hand-to-hand isn’t my thing!” Aimsey goes to cross xir arms before realising that in fact jostles their arm. Instead they keep holding their hand against their chest as they glance between Techno and Phil, “you two good?”

“Hero politics,” Phil says in lieu of an explanation.

Sniff’s entire face screws up but Aimsey looks… strangely intrigued.

“Uh— what do you mean?” Aimsey says.

“The boss likes Sam, he’s scared of me— neither of us will have consequences because of those things.”

“He’s scared of you?” Aimsey tilts her head to the side a little, eyes darting between Phil and Techno, seemingly looking for any reaction. They glance at Sniff quickly before looking back between the two of them.

Phil just nods, “has been since Techno was a kid.”

“Huh,” Sniff says.

Techno looks back at Aimsey who now looks pretty firmly in thought, their eyes closed slightly as they stare at the wall. Whenever Aimsey starts thinking that either means very, very good things for all of society, or something real chaotic is about to happen.

“Hey,” the healer from before, with short black hair and thick glasses smiles at him, their eyes skimming over Phil, Aimsey and Sniff before going back to Techno, “could I talk to you about something?”

Techno turns his head to the side a little bit, “uh— sure.”

“On Thomas’s files you are listed as his medical treatment decision maker,” they explain, “he isn’t capable of making decisions right now, so you're the one I would talk to about medical concerns."

Techno nods, standing up and following after the healer.

They lead him into a relatively small office towards the back of the medical bay. It’s not a particularly big or fancy place, there’s a desk and chair along with a bookcase that lines the right side of the wall. The bookcase is bent in the middle shelves from the giant medical texts that are resting on it.

There are a lot of frog related things across the office, including what looks like some sort of complicated crochet blanket with a derpy looking frog on it.

“I’m Mae,” they say, “I’m one of the head healers here… which is why… I have never seen anything like this before.”

Mae shuts the door behind them with a quiet click, they take a few steps over to their desk before holding out a piece of paper to Techno.

“Can I… read it?”

“Mhm, it’s the test we ran on active hybrid genetics, we ran through some of the most common ones and—”

Techno takes the piece of paper.

HYBRID TYPE	RESULT
Avian	✓
Shulker	✓
Spider	✓
Wither Skeleton	✓
Ender	✕
Creeper	✕
Piglin	✕
Undefinied Hybrid Type	✓

It very quickly feels like whatever walls of stability and the things he *thought* he knew about Tommy are being torn down right in front of him.

Five hybrid types. At once.

Techno has *one* and he nearly died from it.

“That’s…” Techno just stares at the paper, “that’s not physically possible.”

Mae nods.

“That’s— *that’s five different active hybrid types,* right?”

They nod again.

“Most… most people die after one.”

Mae nods again, “it could be an error in the testing— but I’ve never seen an error in the testing like this. Avian and Shulker hybrid types aren’t compatible, this should’ve beyond killed him. None of these are compatible hybrid types; it should've… killed him.”

Techno nods, “does that mean— if he’s been blued he’s going to die.”

“I don’t know,” Mae grabs another piece of paper, “we didn’t find any blue in his system at all— no drugs, no anything. Yet, he’s experiencing the symptoms of blue specifically— it doesn’t make much sense to me either. It’s almost like his body has absorbed the drug to create energy or something. If you want my honest opinion— I think if he was blued properly he would absorb it before it could make any change.”

Techno nods.

“I don’t want to— presume anything, but do you know anyone who would know anything more about cases like this?”

There’s only one answer in Techno’s mind, Bad.

Techno hasn’t talked to him since— the last time he went to Reddings Street with Tommy. He doesn’t know if Techno would even be let in, things were a lot less tense between heroes and *everyone else* last time Techno went.

But if he wants to have… *any* clue what’s happening here it’s probably not a terrible idea to go to the one place in L’Manberg where there are swaths of blue hybrids, including a self-proclaimed expert on blue and people who gained hybrid traits because of the drug.

“I— have a contact who might understand. I can’t promise anything— I think we’re on good terms but I don’t really have any way of knowing.”

Mae nods, “this set of hybrid types could also lead to extremely strong powers

Techno knows a head healer isn’t stupid, getting the position is not easy at all— Sniff has been working in the medical bay for a few weeks and Techno *knows* all the people working here are brilliant.

Techno's entire body tenses up as his eyes dart to Mae's. His hand immediately clenches into a fist, just in case.

"Relax," Mae says, "I'm the only one who's seen this report for a reason. I have no plans on letting anyone else see it and come to their own, most likely similar, positions."

"Why aren't you—" Techno starts.

"Because I swore an oath," Mae says, "not to any hero or political entity. Because I know he's a teenager who cried for his mum when he was in agonising pain, even though I think his mum has something to do with this."

Techno just looks at them.

Mae hands over the report paper, "you and I are the only ones who have seen this… if you think you can get answers or help for Tommy somewhere that isn't here, I suggest you take it. This is… a medical marvel and something that no one else can ever find out about."

"Why?"

Mae gives a slightly sadder smile for a second, "because this is exactly what blue was meant to do, isn't it? It makes powers stronger, it made— it made Theseus, didn't it? That's what they wanted at the end of the day, unstoppable forces of power under their control."

Techno stares down at the paper clutched in his hand.

And Techno has a thousand questions— why and how did this happen? How is Tommy still alive? This has to be why Tommy thinks his powers are powered by blue, right? Or are there more things Techno doesn't know about Tommy, how many other things does he not know about Tommy?

But most of what he feels is a bone deep sadness for Tommy, because no one deserves this— if Techno even thinks he understands a *fraction* of what is happening here no one deserves that. But how could someone look at Tommy and decide he deserved that hurt.

And then more crushing sadness because— was Tommy alone, in all of this?

Had he ever thought to tell someone, or was this just *another* fucking thing Tommy had carried alone for years?

Techno takes a few steps back away from Mae, still clutching the report in hand, "I— I'm going to go and find—"

And because Techno doesn't want to cry, he tears out of the room. Going back to Reddings, going to find Bad and going to find some *fucking answers* about why someone would put Tommy through any of this.

Once upon a time in a far away land there was a young boy named Tommy.

Tommy lived with his mummy and daddy in a very poor, sad part of the kingdom. The part of the kingdom where he was from wanted to live where all the parties and fancy sweets were!

So lots of people tried to take a magic potion that would make you rich. The magic potion was very, very dangerous and even sometimes made people fall asleep forever.

However, the brave little Tommy wanted to make his parents proud. He wanted to move them all to the kingdom with the parties and the fancy sweets.

His mummy and daddy told him about the magic potion and that he was the strongest boy in the whole wide world. He could take the magic potion and stay wide awake! He wouldn't get all sleepy like the neighbours used to!

So Tommy decided he would drink the magic potion, and the nice little drink that made it all taste better according to his parents.

However… his parents hadn't told him how ouchie it would be.

It hurt very, very badly, but Tommy was the strongest boy in the whole wide world. His mummy even held his hand when he cried, which was very nice of her!

And it worked! The next day there was a small pile of coins by the fireplace, they were the richest they ever were! Maybe they could even move to the place in the kingdom with parties and fancy sweets and rainbows and maybe even unicorns!

But Tommy found out it wasn't enough. Lots of people had small piles of coins, that wasn't special enough.

His parents didn't want Tommy to be rich, they wanted him to be the richest! So they asked him to drink more potion, so one day he would be so rich the King would ask him to move into the palace.

Tommy didn't like that idea very much, the potion hurt really badly and made it feel like his entire body was tearing apart! But Tommy wasn't a very strong boy, so his parents could make him drink the magic potion even if he didn't want to.

Again.

And again.

And again.

Until one day, one year after he first tried the magical potion, his mummy wanted him to drink even more potion. Tommy didn't want to be in pain, he wasn't the strongest boy in the whole wide world—

"Mama— Mama, please no, please no, Mama. Please, I've been good! I've been good, you said no more if I was good!"

But the littlest cries fell on deaf ears. No matter how much little Tommy cried and cried, his mummy didn't care!

Tommy just wanted to be the most helpful boy, he wanted to help his family get rich! For them to move out of the sad, sad poor part of town.

And now it hurt Tommy very badly.

"Mama— what did I do wrong? Please, I'm so, so sorry I'll never do it again! I wasn't annoying, I was quiet! You told me to be quiet. Mama, please!"

And his mummy put the magic potion on the table, a deep dark sparkly blue with little flecks of glitter in them.

She then picked up the magic fairy dust that made him very, very sleepy.

It meant that Tommy didn't feel as much pain when he had the magic potion anymore. He would just wake up and a new, bigger pile of coins were there.

And inside Tommy could feel something he never ever felt before, getting bigger and stronger inside of his body. It felt ticklish inside of his body, and Tommy almost wanted to laugh from the feeling.

But he was too sad his mummy had lied to him, he had said no more but his mummy and daddy wanted to be even richer.

The ticklish feeling was getting more and more now. It was so big that Tommy couldn't ignore it!

And with a great, great, big flash—

The sound of a body hitting the floor is a very specific sound. A body is completely devoid of the instinct to tuck up when falling.

A skull cracks on the table before smacking into the floor with a dull thud. Blood starts seeping out of the back of Mama's head, slowly dripping through the cracks in the wood.

All Tommy can do is stare. Stare at the bright green eyes of Mama. They're not looking at anything though, just staring at Tommy like he isn't there.

"Mama?"

Nothing.

"Papa!" Tommy screams as loud as he can, "there's something wrong with Mama! Papa help!"

So his daddy, hearing the commotion, stomped into the dining room where they had been. He immediately saw the sleeping form of Tommy's mummy and Tommy crouched next to her.

“Tommy, she’s sleeping forever. What have you done?” his daddy yelled, “that wasn’t nice of you—”

“—look what you’ve fucking done! How are you supposed to be a hero if you’ve killed your own mother—”

And that’s when his daddy began to get very, very angry and very, very sad. Sometimes when people have emotions that are too big they get mean.

And Tommy’s daddy had very big emotions seeing Tommy’s mummy sleeping. So he cried and cried, big tears streaming down his face as Tommy’s mummy slept.

No matter what his daddy did, she wouldn’t wake up! She was going to sleep forever.

So his daddy turned to face him—

Blood splatters against the wall, slowly dripping down, staining the otherwise white wall.

A baby tooth is thrown across the ground, bloody and painful as Tommy shrieks— more blood and the sound of fists slamming into the body and face and neck and anywhere they can reach on a small, squishy body.

“I didn’t mean to!” Tommy cries out, trying to cover his face the best he can— but Papa is stronger than him and how is a six-year-old supposed to fight against this?

Again that tickling feeling rose out of Tommy. Although this time it felt less like a tickle and a clawing desperation on the inside of his chest. The sort of feeling as when a cat holds onto carpet with their claws.

Another big, bright red bang and—

When Tommy was six years old he was found in the rubble of what used to be his home by the leader of Business Bay, with two bodies that were rendered near unrecognisable, that would later be identified as Cassandra and Seth Sygrove.

When Tommy was six-years-old he learnt that he was something dangerous.

At seventeen Tommy *knows* he’s dangerous.

He still wishes there was something in him that was gentle, but there’s nothing gentle about sharpening a knife or loading a gun.

Chapter End Notes

> So like I know a lot of very horrible things are happening. But from Sam’s perspective it’s kind of hilarious. Tommy finally loses consciousness and then literally like 20/30 seconds later Techno is staring at him and beating the shit out of him.

ALSO HAPPY NEW YEARS AND NEW YEARS EVE to anyone reading this around the time it was originally published, i hope 2025 is going to be good to you!

blood

Chapter Summary

In this odd state between his brain being Purpled, the vigilante and Daniel Greyson, the civilian, all he can really do is look down at his chest.

The blood that is starting to seep through his hoodie.

He liked this hoodie.

or, you thought last chapter was the worst it can get (part 1.)

Chapter Notes

‘two birds’ by regina spektor and ‘listen before i go’ by billie eilish are two songs that I think fit this chapter very well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Purpled doesn’t know what possesses him to glance out of the window when he does.

The hero tower is in Central L’Manberg and Purpled has no reason to suspect Baghera Jones would be anywhere around the hero tower.

Still, Purpled hates his job and finds himself staring out of the window instead of listening to what his supervisor is telling the group about— something. Probably passive aggressively telling off Purpled because Purpled is clearly one of the hero’s favourites and because of it he doesn’t do a lot of work.

The weather is not good, with dark grey clouds that are going to start bucketing down at any moment. It’s windy outside, and generally just a slightly terrible vibe. Still, Purpled is incredibly bored and people watching is more fun on the days where things are off.

That’s when Purpled glances out of the window.

Walking towards the hero tower is a woman with slightly longer than shoulder-length hair that darkens slightly towards the roots. From her back are sprouting a pair of yellow colourful wings, they’re well taken care of and fluffy, kind of looking like Quackity’s wings. Resting on top of her head is a blue, pink, green and yellow flat cap that seems to have some sort of propeller in the middle of it. Over the top she’s wearing a thick yellow bomber jacket with patches of all kinds sewn on.

From the distance Purpled can't see *what* they are, but he can see various patches of colours and fabric.

That's Baghera Jones. The thought pops into his head and Purpled sits up taller.

He only has descriptions from Charlie to work with— that she's blonde and an avian hybrid of some kind and she really likes the colour yellow and Charlie *mentioned* the flat cap that she's wearing right now.

Worst case… it's not Baghera Jones, and Purpled chased after someone with her exact description.

Purpled pushes back from the table he's sitting at, he knows his supervisor says something to him and he *knows* that Purpled is teetering a dangerous line with the easiest job he's ever had but—

If this is Baghera Jones he is not going to miss his chance now. He has a plan to track her down tonight at a market, but… doing it earlier can't hurt, right?

He doesn't even notice that he leaves his phone behind, he doesn't notice that he leaves the taser he's supposed to carry on him as part of security at the tower.

He just pushes away from the table and speeds out of the room as quickly as he can without running.

As he's only on the second floor he's able to get down to the first floor quickly. The lobby is easy enough to get through as he shows his work ID. He shoots Kristin a quick smile and she shoots one back.

Then Purpled is scanning around the streets. There are cars and people everywhere— the consequence of the lunch rush in this area. Some of the cafes across the street have lines out of the door.

However, Purpled only has to scan for yellow.

She's down the street, she's made some distance in the time it took Purpled to get onto the street, but it won't be a problem to fill that distance. He shoves his hands in his pockets before starting to almost-jog in the direction she's heading.

People are bustling down the street the way they do lunch time in Central L'Manberg, workers from the tower and various other people around the area. There's chatter and everyone and their mother are taking phonecalls.

Cars are speeding down the road, and somewhere Purpled can hear one of the trains rumbling into a nearby station.

Still, he keeps up his pace in order to catch up with Jones.

In about thirty seconds he is walking behind her, head down and waiting for a chance to interrupt. He doesn't really know what he's going to say, but he knows that there will be a

chance.

Jones mutters something under her breath, very clearly in French.

Purpled… does not know French.

It's at times like this he curses Tubbo for not being around. For all of his flaws, Tubbo does know a bunch of languages and Purpled knows French is one of them because when Tubbo still lived with them he liked swearing in French.

She looks down at her phone, before looking up at the streets bewilderedly.

And so Purpled has his chance to make polite conversation.

"Sorry Miss," Purpled says, "do you need a hand with anything?"

Jones's face relaxes and she turns to look at Purpled with a small smile, "thank you! I've been curious about where the uh— Hall of Heroes is," her voice very clearly carries a French accent, which could be fake if she's trying to hide her identity.

She could also just be French, that's a thing someone can be.

"Oh, yeah. I'm heading that way too," he lies like a liar, "so basically at the end of this street you're going to turn left, that'll take you to Ender's Square. There's a couple of cafes and stuff around there, a good area to have lunch and then on the North edge of Ender's Square is the Hall of Heroes."

Jones nods, "well, if you're going the same way as me, we might as well walk together for a little bit. It seems L'Manberg has become a very dangerous place in the last few months."

Purpled wants to laugh, he wants to scream and laugh because he's talking to a former weapon's dealer about how dangerous L'Manberg is. He is trying to find information, something he was extremely not trained to do. He doesn't even know *why* he's keeping this up.

"First time in L'Manberg?" Purpled asks, shoving his hands in his pockets as he starts down the street.

Baghera walks next to him, she's slightly taller than him so Purpled has to lengthen his steps to keep in time with her while also trying to look casual about this entire thing. He is walking next to one of the most famous weapon dealers in Logstedchire's history.

"Ah, no, no," Baghera laughs, "I lived here for many years when I was young. It has been a while since I've been back though, they're created the Hall of Heroes since I've been gone and I'll admit, I'm intrigued. Have you been before?"

"Oh, yeah," Purpled glances over in the direction to where the building is, "went with school once."

Which is a blatant lie, Purpled didn't *go* to school. That feels like an explanation a lot easier than *'one time I went there because that's where the handoff for several thousand dollars between two gangs were and I was hired as protection if anything went wrong'.*

Baghera smiles, "oh what was that like?"

"Just talking out of their asses about heroes and how great they are," Purpled crosses his arms and that shocks a laugh out of Baghera.

"Are you from Logstedchire?"

"Born and bred," Purpled says with a sigh.

Which again. Is a lie.

"That's where I lived when I lived here," Baghera looks over her shoulder, her eyes going wide for a second before she stops walking, she peers over Purpled's shoulder again before shaking her head, like she's trying to banish thoughts away.

"Everything good?"

"Oh— I just…" Baghera keeps looking over Purpled's shoulder before shaking her head, "I just thought I saw someone…"

A raindrop lands on Purpled's head, Purpled cranes his head up to see the angry dark clouds above him. Then another raindrop, then another raindrop—

And then it starts raining, droplets of water hitting the ground as Purpled sighs, pulling his hoodie around him slightly more and looking at Baghera, who is still looking over his shoulder, eyes slightly narrowed.

"I'll leave you to whatever it is your doing," Baghera's eyes are still trained over his shoulder, and Purpled wants to turn around but he doesn't want to look that obvious, "I need to go and see if this is—"

She starts walking off.

"Wait, Baghera—"

She stops midstep, whirling around to look at him, "I didn't tell you my name."

Ah.

This is why he wasn't a spy.

Baghera doesn't move a lot, but something in her stance changes and Purpled feels a *tiny* bit nervous about it. She stands up a little taller and her hand darts into one of her pockets, eyes watching Purpled carefully.

The rain starts getting heavier, and a sea of umbrellas go up. All Purpled can really do is pull his hood over his head, and Baghera's wings slowly start getting weighed down with the sheer amount of water around.

Raindrops bounce off of the pavement, car lights turn on and people start rushing even more to where they have to go— hopefully away from the rain because this weather is not enjoyable.

Purpled cups his hands over the top of his eyes so he can see Baghera better.

"You really gonna do this in a group of people?" Purpled gestures his head around to the masses of people walking around them that don't give either of them more than a glance, "my intentions have not changed."

"Why do you know me?" Baghera's eyes are narrowed, still looking from any sudden movement from Purpled, "why do you know my name?"

"Why did Nelson-Jones pay you?" Purpled calls out at her.

Baghera's entire face changes, her eyes dart around wildly, before she surges forwards. She wraps Purpled's arm up in a grip that Purpled couldn't break even if he tried to.

Then she drags Purpled across the road, over to Ender's Square. There are plenty of people there despite the poor weather. Umbrellas go up and people pull their hoods over their heads, and Baghera does not let go of Purpled's arm.

There's something beyond determined in her eyes, and Purpled is a little bit afraid of it.

Ender's Square is largely a greenspace with some cafes and tables and otherwise makes for a generally nice community area— there's a couple of people playing soccer despite the rain starting to get heavier and there are two little kids wrapped up in raincoats hitting each other with sticks.

Standing at the end of Ender's Square is a large modern building. It's all sharp angles and giant windows at the front, with no windows on the alleyways either side of the building. There's a couple of people in there, but otherwise the Hero Hall is about as boring as it tends to be. Some of the bushes out the front are dying because it's Winter.

Exciting business.

Why would Baghera Jones even need to go there?

Purpled is too dumb to figure it out, maybe she wants to catch herself up with the things that have changed quickly, they tend to be pretty good at putting statues of the dead heroes up as soon as they die.

Baghera stares at Purpled again, her hand still in her pocket and eyes still shifty and darting around the place, "he paid me to stop selling weapons, it's not more complicated than that."

And Purpled— before he is anything else, is a teenage boy, "I literally do not believe you."

“Well… that seems to be a personal problem—”

“You used to supply the vigilantes with your weapons, what changed?”

Baghera doesn’t say anything, her expression stays exactly the same so it’s not even like Purpled can start to dissect *why* she’s doing that or what any of this fucking means—

She’s acting like a guilty person though.

Purpled knows guilt, he sees it on Tommy’s face every day, and this is what guilt fucking looks like. Regret and confusion and remorse are all on Baghera’s face, and Purpled knows better than most how cutthroat Logstedchire can be, especially when money is involved.

“Did you sell them out?” Purpled whispers, “did these people trust you and did you fucking sell them out?”

The anger that overtakes Baghera’s face is something to truly be marvelled at, the way her entire face turns into one of rage and grief at once as she just stares at Purpled, mouth slightly open.

“How. Dare. You,” she hisses, “you don’t know what the *fuck* you’re talking about,” she glances over her shoulder again, “I would *never* give those people away— they’re my family. They were gone by the time I took that deal. The deal meant I wouldn’t get arrested for my involvement in supplying vigilantes with weapons, it meant that I got paid and promised to never sell weapons in L’Manberg again.”

Purpled just looks at her

Baghera takes a step back, “now if you’d excuse me— I had to be at the Hall of Heroes about uh— five minutes ago,” she whirls around on her heel and heads straight towards the Hall of Heroes.

“Would you testify?” Purpled calls out after her.

Baghera pauses mid-step, slowly turning around to look at Purpled, confusion lacing her expression, “pardon?”

“Against Nelson-Jones?” Purpled continues, “let’s say hypothetically you knew some of his crimes, and hypothetically there was a situation where he was on trial. Would you testify against him?”

Baghera closes her eyes for a moment, “I would tell you men like him never go on trial.”

“And I would tell you that’s not an answer.”

Baghera sighs, she takes a deep breath before running a hand down her face, “then yes. I would. Even if I knew it wouldn’t do anything, even if I knew I would be killed immediately after for saying it. He took away my first family, I will tear down the world if it means for a moment in time he feels half of the grief I feel.”

“There’s a group that wants him gone,” Purpled says, “they found your name on his files.”

Baghera tilts her head at Purpled a little, a bright smile overtaking her entire face, “there’s already groups trying to get rid of him.”

And that’s when there’s an earsplitting bang and a roar of smoke starts trailing out of the Hero Hall. Glass from the second storey window shatters and in a swarm of fire and smoke it surges forwards.

He looks at Baghera with wide eyes, and Baghera just shoots him a small smile.

She then turns around on her heel, running towards the building.

And Purpled— knows this isn’t his problem, he *knows* this isn’t his problem, he’s not even in his vigilante gear. He knows this is Elysium and the more times he interrupts their missions the harder everything becomes for him.

Still… he became a vigilante to try and protect people.

Purpled starts running.

Tubbo wakes up to a screeching alarm in his ears and Pac standing at the side of his bed shaking him awake.

“Five more minutes,” Tubbo mumbles, burying his head underneath the pillow.

Pac rips the pillow off of Tubbo’s head and drops it on the ground, Tubbo groans and rolls over to hit any part of Pac’s body he can reach. He more just— flails in Pac’s general direction, managing to hit him in the arm once.

Tubbo sighs, resting his forehead on the mattress since he is now pillowless, “what the fuck is that?”

“Alarm, we have to be awake bright and early so we can get nice and experimented on y’know?”

Tubbo does not know.

Tubbo deeply does not know.

In fact, this might be the least Tubbo has ever known.

He rolls onto his back, staring up at the ceiling. It’s still the same grey ceiling that it was yesterday.

Pac throws Tubbo’s jumpsuit in his face, “you have ten minutes before the guards come and get us. I’d recommend you use the bathroom and also try and control your hair, you kind of look like a….” Pac seems to think about it for a few seconds, “paint brush.”

“A paintbrush?” Tubbo shrieks, “that’s so fucking rude you don’t even know how fucking rude that is—”

“And then after that we get assigned to things!” Pac smiles, “if you’re lucky you get dish duty, if you’re not you’re going to get poked with all sorts of various drugs for the day and you’ll be lucky if you get back here at night.”

Tubbo stares at the ceiling for a few more moments.

Sure.

Fine.

He rolls out of bed, trudging to the bathroom to put on the stupid fucking jumpsuit and sort out his ‘paintbrush hair’. He doesn’t really manage to fix it, but when he leaves the bathroom his hair is slightly flatter than it was and he has his jumpsuit on.

“So like…” Tubbo squints at the wall, “what’s the deal?”

“Oh! Yeah! Basically they’re going to bring the forcefield down then we head to the cafeteria,” Pac says.

Tubbo feels like he’s going to throw up.

Once again. He has really put himself in a fucking situation here, it’s got to be one of the situations of all time. If he survives this entire ordeal he is going to write the best memoir about it.

The orange force field in front of the cell comes down, revealing a couple of guards roaming around this hallway.

Tubbo didn’t— see much of this hallway due to the fact he had the shit beat out of him before being dropped off in the cell.

There are multiple cells with the same orangeish force field that is on their cell. All of them seem to be a very similar design, a couple have an extra bed thrown in there. People are mulling about, with a pretty solid stream of people walking towards what is probably the cafeteria.

Pac nudges Tubbo with his shoulder, “stick with me, I’ll introduce you to my friends.”

Tubbo, who has nothing better to do just nods.

As he walks down the hallways his eyes scan for everything. His eyes scan the other prisoners and people who are here. The thing that mostly gets him about this is how… tall and strong most of these people look. A lot of them are incredibly built and Tubbo doesn’t want to *imagine* what kind of powers these people have.

It suddenly dawns on him that he is… in jail with mass murderers and all types of horrible people. He shrinks a little bit closer to Pac who doesn’t seem to mind as he keeps his chin

high and walks past everyone.

Occasionally he'll shoot a person a little wave and they'll wave back.

It seems, by some fucking miracle, he's made friends with someone in the prison who people *don't* want to beat up, and he can only hope that applies to him because otherwise his time in Pandora's is not going to last very long.

He shuffles behind Pac, keeping his head down and very careful not to make eye contact with people.

Eventually they reach a larger room, this room is grey (like the rest of the fucking prison are they allergic to colour here or something?) Scattered all across the room are a series of tables and benches.

They all seem to be bolted into the ground with some industrial level bolting.

At the back of the room is what looks like some sort of serving station, there are guards around it with very big machine guns.

Tubbo gulps.

Pac nudges Tubbo's shoulder with his own again.

"Relax," Pac whispers, "they love me here nothing's going to happen to you. Plus they're too afraid of Tina."

"Who's Tina?"

"PAC!" A voice yells across the cafeteria and Tubbo jumps.

His head whips over to where the voice came from.

Sitting at one of the tables in the far back corner, almost as physically close to the serving station as someone can get are two women sitting at the table.

One is standing up, waving in Pac's direction. She has brown and white hair, split pretty evenly around the middle and Tubbo wants to ask if somehow she's found hair dye or bleach in Pandora's which feels incredibly impressive to him. She's wearing the same sky blue jumpsuit as everyone else but like Pac it's tied around her waist instead of over her arms. She's wearing a white t-shirt which looks like it has a couple of blood stains on it and a brown cardigan thrown over the top of it.

Next to her, sitting down is a woman with long brown hair. Poking through a side fringe are two dark purple horns that turn almost white at the end. She's wearing the blue jumpsuit normally, sleeves rolled up slightly but otherwise looking pretty normal about the entire thing. Getting closer Tubbo can see that she has a carrot earring in one of her ears—

Then realises the woman next to her has the same earring in hers.

Cute.

Pac grabs Tubbo by the sleeve of his jumpsuit and drags both of them over to the table.

For a moment he wonders what they see— probably a boy with kind of floppy brown hair and a burn scar that takes up one side of his face. He could thank Elysium for *that* one, they really fumbled what could've been their best member but *nooo* .

"Oh, you made a friend!" the one with the cardigan says excitedly, "who's this?"

"This is Tubbo!" Pac sits down across from her and pulls Tubbo onto the seat, "Tubbo. This is Tina and Bagi. We've been friends since we were kids!"

"You mean you were a kid?" Bagi returns, "we were adults."

"You were teenagers, that's barely *an adult* , you still didn't know how to pay rent."

"You were basically a toddler," Bagi waves her hand around before leaning against Tina, half resting her head on her shoulder, "how old is our new friend?"

"Seventeen."

Tina's eyes go wide at that, "you're seventeen?"

"Uh— last I checked. I'm eighteen in like four months."

"You're a baby!" Bagi coos.

Tina leans forwards slightly, eyes narrowing, "what does a seventeen year old do to be in here?"

Tubbo has no idea why, but he looks at Pac like Pac is going to even slightly get him out of this situation.

Pac is not going to get him out of this situation, this is a question asked directly to Tubbo.

"Um," is what Tubbo eventually decides to say.

It's a pretty intelligent thing to say.

He's a pretty fucking clever guy.

"Pissed off the wrong guy," Tubbo decides on, "turns out being the person responsible for stealing a mass amount of data from William Nelson-Jones kinda means they can throw you in here without a trial—"

Everyone at the table, but in particular Tina and Bagi are staring at him like Tubbo has admitted to murdering their puppies or something. Tina's eyes are wide and her mouth is fully open. Bagi's eyes are wide and she's clutching onto the front of her shirt like she's—

clutching her pearls or something. Pac knew about Nelson-Jones but still looks equally shocked, mouth slightly open.

“Um… you don’t like the guy right?”

Tina gags, “that guy? No— we hate him.”

“You *stole from his computer?* ” Pac repeats, “what did you find?”

“Dunno— handed it off to a friend then I was chucked in here. From the couple things I saw he has a bunch of files dating back decades, it’s up to my team now to go through the information and do something with it.”

Tina blinks at him a few times, “you should really be dead.”

“Huh?” he can’t quite keep the desperation out of his voice because *fucking what* .

“I mean pissing off Nelson-Jones is like a huge thing,” Pac waves his hands vaguely, “he has his little assassins take people out for way less.”

“Do you have any strong powers?” Bagi asks, “that’s totally a reason they’d keep you alive, experiment on the powers. That’s what they did with us.”

“No powers,” Tubbo shrugs, “wait… what powers do you guys have?”

Bagi smiles, showing her teeth which look slightly too sharp to *not* unnerve Tubbo a huge amount, “I can replicate the powers of people whose blood I taste.”

Tina gives a small sigh, breathing out and moving a small strand of hair out of her eyes, “I’m particularly adept at compulsion.”

“You can make people do shit?” Tubbo whispers.

“Within a certain amount,” Tina sighs, “I can’t make people kill themselves anymore— I could do that when I was younger. Now it has to be within something they would want for themselves anyway— I could go and make you get my breakfast maybe but much beyond that is… probably not gonna work.”

“I’ll grab us breakfast,” Pac stands up, “what does everyone want?”

“Pancakes,” Tina and Bagi say together, before looking at each other and laughing. Tina leans into Bagi and Bagi wraps an arm around Tina’s shoulders, pulling her closer into a half-hug.

Is Tubbo going to be third-wheeling while Pac’s gone?

Fuck. No one warned him about the worst thing he’s going to experience while in prison— gay people being cute and him being a third wheel. He couldn’t escape it from Aimsey and Guqqie and now he can’t escape it while in literal prison.

But Pac is looking at him expectantly.

Oh yeah, breakfast.

Food.

Consuming.

All of those super fun things.

“Uh,” Tubbo says.

“I’ll get you something,” Pac says with a grin, “you’re going to learn the wonders of eggs in Pandora’s. Are the experiments and the general bad things a problem? Yes! Do we have amazing scrambled eggs? Also yes!”

Tubbo just stares at him blankly.

Sure.

Pac shoots up off of the bench towards the serving station.

He looks at Tina and Bagi giving them a small wave, “uh— hello.”

Tina laughs, “hi?”

“I don’t really know what to say,” Tubbo glances around the cafeteria which is quickly becoming more and more full, “like— yeah, I don’t know.”

“You don’t have powers,” Bagi points a spoon at him, “you will be more than fine, all you have to do is not piss people off y’know?”

Tubbo glances over Bagi’s shoulder to see Pac managing to carry four trays which he is loading up with food. Tubbo would be impressed if he wasn’t horrified about the pile of eggs that are being piled onto one of the trays.

“I’m not very good at not pissing people off. That’s kind of the whole reason I’m here.”

Bagi laughs, her teeth are sharp, “well… then it was nice knowing you Tubbo!”

Pac returns with several full trays, he drops two in front of Bagi and Tina expertly, the food on them doesn’t even go everywhere. He then slides Tubbo’s across the table which lands perfectly in front of him.

Tubbo stares down at the eggs, there is a small mountain of scrambled eggs in front of him, “these are a lot of eggs.”

Pac sits down next to him, “those are our servings because everyone deserves to enjoy the wonders of Pandora’s scrambled eggs, especially on their first day.”

Tubbo glances around, and all three of them are staring at him like Tubbo is about to uncover the holy grail or something.

Slowly… Tubbo picks up his work and stabs a section of the eggs.

Then he starts eating them and—

Tubbo hates to be dramatic (a blatant lie to be honest) but these are the greatest scrambled eggs that he has ever been blessed with the honour of eating. They're perfect— the right amount of cooked, with pepper and other spices and herbs and things Tubbo can't identify because these are the greatest eggs he's ever eaten.

He stares at Pac with wide eyes, before bending over the tray and shovelling his face full of as many eggs as he can physically manage without choking on them and dying because that would be an incredibly fucking dumb way to die.

The three around him bark out with laughter at that, Pac basically deflates and collapses onto the table. Tina throws her weight into Bagi and Bagi smacks her hand on the table before collapsing into laughter like how Pac did.

Tubbo stares at them for a moment, "they're good."

Then he goes back to eating his brilliant, amazing eggs.

Is prison great? No.

Does Tubbo get good eggs out of it? Yes.

No one has ever really considered the catering of prison— and hey— sure Pandora's may do unethical, illegal experimentation on human guinea pigs and like… sure they might be incredibly abusive.

But the eggs are amazing.

And at the end of the day, do people who make amazing scrambled eggs deserve to be tried for crimes against humanity and the miscarriage of justice? Well… yes.

But it's far funnier if Tubbo says no.

The other three fall into some conversation that Tubbo can't concentrate on because these eggs are fucking brilliant. Tubbo catches parts of phrases as he eats more and more eggs, he hasn't eaten in a while and now he's been blessed with heaven on a plate.

In fact, Tubbo is so distracted with his eggs he doesn't see someone limping over to their table.

"It's a new guy," someone says, and then someone is leaning into Tubbo's face, across his tray of brilliant, amazing, spectacular eggs.

Tubbo's eyes snap up from his breakfast to the person there, it's no one that Tubbo knows which either means very good or very bad things for him. Leaning over his eggs is relatively thin man with black curly hair and the start of a sick ass tattoo peeking out from underneath the sky blue jumpsuit.

“Hello,” Tubbo says, he rather tactfully slides his plate away from this guy before giving Tina a look across the table.

“Oh, he talks fancy too. Why are you here, fancy boy?”

“Serial murder,” Tubbo deadpans before shovelling more eggs into his mouth.

“Oh, he thinks he’s funny too.”

“I don’t think I’m funny,” Tubbo says before his brain can recognise that it is a very poor idea to piss this man off, “I know I’m funny.”

Why did he say that?

Does he want to die in prison?

The man smiles slightly, it is not friendly at all.

Tubbo can recognise that he’s fucked this one up, he can recognise that he’s made a poor choice here but he can also recognise that what he said was pretty funny and if he gets beat up for this it’ll mostly be worth it.

“Back off, Bugs,” Tina says through gritted teeth.

“Aw, is the little rabbit going to do something about it?”

That’s what makes Tubbo sit up, because he can handle insults that’s fine— but he is not going to fucking watch his kinda new friends get insulted. So he looks this fucker of a man— Bugs, his name is Bugs and Tubbo can recognise that’s a nickname but still.

Bugs.

Bugs has a limp, it’s pretty noticeable considering almost all of his weight is on his other foot and he seems to have some sort of bandage strapped around his knee in order to try and find some relief. He also has a couple of scars on the side of his neck that imply maybe some drugs were used at some point. His nose is wonky, probably from years of being punched in it.

While he’s skinny, he seems to be someone of importance here, which Tubbo can tell because everyone’s gone quiet and is now looking at their table. Even Pac, Tina and Bagi who otherwise seem pretty friendly but people who everyone knows not to cross looks slightly uncomfortable with the attention.

So Bugs— this fucker, is an important player in the ecosystem here at Pandora’s.

Tubbo tilts his head to the side, “how’s the leg?”

Bugs eyes snap away from Tina and onto Tubbo, “what do you mean?”

“How’s your leg?” Tubbo looks back down at his eggs, taking another bite of them, “it’s not strapped correctly, that’s not going to alleviate any pain, in fact your limp is probably just injuring your other leg. I would ask why you don’t have it properly done but I know for a fact that you didn’t go to any sort of medical professional for it. Now that leads to the amazing question of why— why is your knee busted and why haven’t you gone to anyone about it. Unless you don’t want people to know that you got your ass fucking beat.”

Bugs eyes go wide— like a bug’s, the nickname makes sense now.

Tubbo smiles up from his eggs again, “you still wanna play the tough guy act and act like someone— probably in this room— didn’t beat the shit outta you? You can do that, that’s totally fine to do. You just look like a fucking idiot doing it, did you tell your little friends that you bent it weird?”

That’s when Tubbo gets punched in the face.

Even as the pain shoots through the side of his face, all he can think of is yeah *that’s probably fair.*

He goes flying back into Pac, Pac manages to make it so both of them don’t go flying off the bench.

Tubbo takes a deep breath, “okay, first of all— rude.”

And Tubbo knows he’s not an amazing fighter, he’s short and not all that strong. He’s okay with a gun but he doesn’t have a gun right now.

Tubbo is good at two things though. One, finding weakness. Two, being filled with fucking spite.

He picks up the tray his eggs were brought over on, the plate smashes onto the ground followed by the sound of cutlery clashing to the floor.

Then as hard as he can he hits the plastic tray into Bugs’s bad knee. That makes him bend over, clutching his knee as he cries out in pain.

He hits Bugs across the face as hard as he can with the plastic tray.

That makes Bugs fall over onto the floor, clutching his knee with both hands as another hand comes up to grab his own face.

Tubbo just looks at him sprawled on the floor.

“Now you look real fucking stupid,” Tubbo announces down at Bugs, “you’ve automatically lost any reputation you had here, and you’re not going to get it back by jumping me in a hallway or something—”

Tubbo stares at was once his beautiful, delicious, tasty eggs on the ground around his smashed plate.

“FUCK! MY EGGS!”

A hand clasps his shoulder.

Oh well, it was a good one day in prison.

He got a lot done, achieved a lot and generally had a slightly awful time but that’s okay. Had a breakdown, ate some eggs, overall Tubbo would call it a successful twelve hours for him.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Tubbo says, trying to wiggle his shoulders away from whatever guard is holding them, “he totally started it, I was totally allowed to finish it.”

“You need to come with us.”

Pac’s eyes go wide, as his eyes bore into Tubbo, “surely we can be a *littleeee* bit nicer than we’d normally be,” he says, eyes darting between all of the guards, “it’s only his first day.”

Bagi grabs Pac’s arm across the table, not really holding him in place but more of a reminder. Tubbo isn’t even offended— Pac probably has not survived this long just defending every idiot who makes a bad decision in their first few days of being locked up in here.

Tubbo’s lived a long and fulfilling life.

He’s not even mad about it.

(He is. He’s so mad about it. He can’t even legally drink, in L’Manberg the drinking age should be younger because of the fucking bullshit they have to go through.)

“Hey, it’s so fine,” Tubbo shoots Pac his best smile.

He’s not like… super fucking pleased about dying but he would be way less pleased about Pac if *he* died.

So Bagi manages to keep her grip on Pac’s arm, and Pac doesn’t get off his bench despite how tempted he looks to do so.

And Tubbo is walked out of the room, hand latched over his shoulder to *who knows where* .

Now is as good a time as any to come to terms with his mortality, he supposes.

Tubbo is walked through the prison, he does his best to remember the route.

Left. Left. Right. Left. Straight ahead. He doesn’t pass any other inmates, he does pass empty cells and a few people cleaning them out in worker’s uniforms.

They all look at Tubbo like they’re guilty of something—

And Tubbo supposes they are.

They’re all guilty of something.

Tubbo can't help but notice that he's not the one in the cell right now.

They walk through the prison a little more, just straight ahead so no more directions for him to remember.

The guards let go of him when Tubbo is facing a large wooden door.

The door looks a lot nicer than most of the other things here and is the first real sign of any colour in this place that isn't sky blue, orange or grey.

He stares at the door, before looking over at the guards.

The guards literally do not do *anything* to help out with Tubbo's confusion, and stare back at him with goldfish empty brains.

So Tubbo flings open the heavy wooden door in front of him.

What is in front of him is the nicest room— easily, in this entire place. It's a modern-looking office space, with very dark blue walls that have built-in bookshelves on the wall opposite from the door. The bookshelves are mostly empty with a few stray books and even a lego set. There's an armchair to the side of the room, along with a couple of half-wilting plants. One plant is holding for dear life on the bookshelf, and the one in the corner of the room looks slightly better.

There's a light wooden floor with a carpet thrown across it. On the carpet is a long, thin, old looking desk with a very comfortable looking old office chair.

More importantly… is the person in the seat.

Sitting at the desk is a relatively young woman. She has long red hair that she's wearing out, flowing over the back of the plush seat she's sitting in. Freckles litter her forehead and arms, along with being relatively pale. Both of her feet are up on the desk, revealing incredibly chunky black boots as she reads some sort of paper that hides most of her face.

She glances over the paper, revealing an impressive scar along her cheek bone as she swings both of her feet off the desk and looks at Tubbo.

"The man of the hour," she says, "I've heard a lot about you Tubbo."

"Uh, thanks?"

"I was so upset when William sent you here without consulting us, normally he tends to consult us about making decisions like that. The public who are aware of your case *are not* happy about it. He's been getting sloppy these past few years so things like that are to be expected from him."

Tubbo's brain does a reboot. She is one of the hero committee members.

Kiera Kingston. She'd come up in Tubbo's research before stealing information off of William Nelson-Jones.

She's the youngest committee member at— twenty-eight, having gotten the job at twenty-four after the announcement that her mother, Annette Kingston was retiring.

Due to how relatively new she was, there wasn't much information on her— some basic things about various women she'd dated, some things about the general human rights violations at Pandora's, but never really enough to pin down a solid crime that Anemoi could have her prosecuted for.

Diversity win! One of the five fascist assholes with their boots on the throats of basically the entire country is a woman!

And it appears… either Tubbo is about to get executed or a golden opportunity has just thrown itself into his lap.

Which is a pretty fucking accurate summary of his life.

"I'm Kiera Kingston," she says, "but I'm sure you knew that."

She holds out her hand to shake.

Tubbo just stares at it.

"Alright then," Kiera mutters, "probably should have expected that. I've been reading through some of what we know about you Tubbo Underscore, your track record is impressive — a full scholarship to a school in Prime when you're from Logstedchire, suspected works on security in fighting rings when you would have been— twelve and thirteen. Then of course the infamous break-in at my boss's work."

Tubbo takes a deep breath to try and calm himself down. Sure, he's facing one of the people responsible for just… all of this fucking mess. And that's why he needs to not be blinded by rage.

"To me it appears you're quite brilliant," Kiera places the piece of paper down, "you do have quite a bit of a temper on you if your stunt in the cafeteria is anything to be judged… but it would just be *so sad* to see you wasted considering how brilliant you are."

Tubbo doesn't know how much more contempt he can get through his face, but he's going to find a way to do it.

There's something— everything about her. The way she talks and acts makes Tubbo want to tear her fucking eyes out of her face. Something about this entire situation makes Tubbo, who isn't actually that violent of a person, want to start throwing things and beating her near to death.

She is one of the people who can be directly blamed for… so many problems, only in Pandora's let alone the rest of the fucking country. While Kiera didn't lay the foundation for the problems that were plaguing them now— she did nothing to undo them.

Tubbo almost thinks that's worse.

“And your talents are just—” Kiera lets out a whistle, “so I’m suggesting something quite simple actually. You help my scientists with what we’re trying to achieve here. Bring a fresh new perspective to the situation, I might even be able to get you a plea deal.”

And— helping the scientists is interesting, Tubbo knows that. It might give him access to documents he would otherwise not have any access to, it would certainly give him access to research to *try* and figure out what the experiments in Pandora’s are aiming to achieve.

It would be— so fucking useful to Anemoi.

“A plea deal requires for me to have had a fucking court case you bastard,” Tubbo says through gritted teeth.

“Ah,” Kiera leans back in her seat, putting her feet up on the table, “I suppose that’s correct. I guess I forgot I couldn’t just say pretty words in someone’s face when they’re someone clever. It’s been so long since I’ve interacted with a clever person, I think I’ve forgotten how to do it.”

“Holy fuck just say whatever deal you’re going to offer me because I’m not a fucking idiot,” Tubbo snaps, “stop with all of this high and mighty bullshit. The people you normally deal with aren’t stupid they’re just afraid. I don’t give a fuck about my life enough to take your shit.”

That gets a laugh out of Kiera, “you certainly do have a temper on you.”

“Have you never been faced with someone who genuinely hates you? Or were you protected from that because you are a nepo baby?” Tubbo asks, “because I only hold half of the anger of someone from Logstedchire or Kinoko or from this prison.”

Kiera leans back in her chair a little bit, feet pressing against the edge of the table as she looks at Tubbo, “work with my scientists and I’ll get you out of here.”

Tubbo’s jaw clenches.

“I’m guessing I don’t have much of a choice here?”

Kiera laughs at that, bright and grating on Tubbo’s very existence, “oh Tubbo, of course you always have a *choice* you just might not like the other option very much. You’re just such a dangerous criminal, if someone had reason to think you were going to kill another prisoner the guards would be forced to act. It truly would be a shame if something were to happen to you.”

Tubbo’s afraid he’s going to break his teeth from how hard he is clenching his jaw.

“Sure,” is what Tubbo says.

Now he’s a criminal *and* a class traitor. At the same time.

Not many people can say *that* .

Techno doesn't run to where he knows the entrance for Reddings Street is, but it's a damn near thing. He finds the first taxi he can to take him to Logstedchire because the report tucked into his pocket, surrounded by his closed fist is something that could get stolen off of him on public transport.

And he is not risking that.

The taxi gives him a moment to think, a moment that he is able to lean his head against the door of the taxi and just stare out at the city passing by.

Five active hybrid types in one person is functionally impossible, Techno knows that a very, very rare amount of people who become hybrids because of blue are able to survive two hybrid transformations at the same time.

There is, of course, the possibility that Tommy is just a genetic anomaly and his genetics have combined to make his powers and also five active hybrid types. The thing is… between Tommy thinking his powers are powered by well… blue, the reaction his powers had to what was virtually the opposite of blue and Tommy's fear of sleeping medication and general disdain for hospitals.

A picture is forming in Techno's mind.

He does not like what the picture is starting to look like.

He doesn't like that Techno is pointing fingers at Tommy's long-dead parents but who else is there to point these fingers at? And *how, how* is someone capable of drugging a kid *several* times and letting him go through the blue transformations.

They hurt.

They hurt really bad.

Techno went through one as a grown-ass man and he thought he was going to die.

Five active hybrid genetics are found in Tommy— and even in people with naturally strong powers that's… impossible, even people who have five genetic hybrid genes *somewhere* don't have five active at once.

And it makes sense right— that's the only test that *would* pick up that Tommy has powers. Are Tommy's powers even his own? Or are they a thing that you can't separate from him but otherwise *isn't* him.

He just doesn't know, there's no way of knowing.

And he just *has* to know if Tommy is going to live, if this has fucked everything up in a way that Techno won't be able to live with. He needs to talk with Bad, to figure out what to do in a situation so fucking unprecedented.

"We're… here sir?" the taxi driver says, and it sounds more like a question than anything else. Because… yeah taking a well known hero to the front of an abandoned fish factory is

probably an arguably sketchy thing to have happened.

Techno puts two fifty dollar notes in the taxi driver's hand before flinging open the door.

Reddings is hidden behind a relatively simple location, an old fish factory that closed down years ago. The factory itself is beyond ramshackled and falling apart at this point. It's a large concrete rectangle with the windows mostly smashed in, there's graffiti around a good chunk of this four storey high building.

But… it looks different since the last time Techno saw it. At a closer look there's now grass and a path leading from the pavement up to the front of the doors. The doors are also… replaced, it's no longer a giant archway without anything in it, an actual door has been put on it.

Weird.

There are a few flower beds outside of the factory, there aren't any flowers in them yet but there are small green shoots coming out of them.

It hasn't… been that long since Techno's been here. This place is out of the way, certainly, but it's not like Techno hasn't been here in years, it's been a couple of months. Which to be fair *is* enough time to see change in a place.

The factory beforehand had been empty for years though. It used to be a place where highschoolers would hold their parties, it was a big venue and with a couple of tables and chairs turned out to be pretty alright.

Still, Techno approaches the door, closing one of his hands into fists— just in case.

He slowly knocks on the door.

Out of one of the broken windows the head of a child pops out— attached to a body, it's not a decapitated child, it's the head of a child attached to a body looking out of one of the broken windows at him.

All Techno can see are wide eyes and blonde hair that sprawls in every direction before the kid leans backwards.

"Miss Hannah there's a hero here!" a young voice yells.

There's a deep sigh.

Techno has met Hannah a few times, he can probably count the amount of times that he's met her on one hand. Every time Techno has met her, it normally starts with her holding him at gunpoint.

This time is not different.

Techno has both of his hands up in the air as Hannah swings open the door, a gun trained on him.

Hannah doesn't look that different, her hair is in a braid with various flowers of all kinds interwoven in. It's a little bit messy, like if a bunch of children did it. She's otherwise wearing all black, with a small flower embroidered into the collar of the shirt

"Don't you fucking have something better to do than raid this place for the fifth time— oh, Techno."

Techno waves one of his raised hands, "hi."

"What— what are you doing here?"

"Need to talk to Bad—" he glances at the gun again, "have heroes been giving you trouble here?"

Hannah stops pointing the gun at Techno's face, sliding it into a holster on the side of her leg, "you don't know the half of it. You'd think they have better things to do than pester a community centre, but you would, shockingly, be wrong."

"This place is a community centre now?"

"Yup," Hannah steps to the side, "with a couple of bribes and a lot of threats we've managed to get this place to ourselves. The deal is we don't annoy anyone— well we're annoying people, but aren't disruptive and otherwise we're good."

"Has the funding been fine lately?"

"Uh— I mean we could always do with more money."

And Techno makes a *shit* tonne of money, money he will never use and never has to use. The money is currently just sitting in a bank account doing nothing, but looking around here… it's a good cause. It's something money needs to be funnelled to.

Techno steps past Hannah into what seems to be the first room.

The first room they enter that takes up the main span of the front looks otherwise completely empty. It's a way to hide what's inside from anyone just glancing in— heroes, just glancing in if Techno would have to guess. Sitting by one of the windows is a stool, and on the stool is a kid with wide bright eyes and uncontrollable curly hair.

They stare at Techno for a few seconds.

But in the middle of the otherwise drab, crumbling concrete wall is a bright yellow painted door. There's a lot of splatters of paint at about child eye-level that are clearly done by children, flowers and bad outlines of dogs and cats.

It's a little bit adorable.

Techno glances at Hannah.

Hannah just shoots him a smile, "Jamie— this is Techno, he's a friend."

The kid, Jamie, looks at Techno with distrustful eyes, “he’s a hero— I saw’ed him on the news.”

“Mhmm,” Hannah hums, she holds her hand out towards Jamie and Jamie immediately runs towards her, latching their hand around hers, “but I’ll let you in on a little secret, Jamie,” Hannah crouches down so she’s Jamie’s height, “he’s actually one of us.”

“Wait, don't tell them that—” Techno starts.

“Techno knew Bad when Techno was younger, do you remember Bad? He works mostly with the grown ups in Reddings Street.”

Jamie nods.

“So— Techno is one of us, he might be a hero too, but he was one of us first and he’ll be one of us long after he’s a hero. You don’t need to trust him or anything, but I trust him and I promise he’s not going to get you into trouble, and if he does—” Hannah brandishes her gun again.

Arguably an unhinged thing to do. Techno can respect it.

Jamie nods a few times, still looking at Techno before they sprint off the other direction, running through the bright yellow painted door.

“Their brother uh— got arrested by a hero,” Hannah says as the yellow door closes behind the kid, “it super fucked up his arm, he doesn’t have much feeling or mobility in his right arm anymore. Jamie’s a bit distrusting of heroes it’s nothing personal—”

“It is personal,” Techno says, “it was personal as soon as Jamie’s brother’s arm was injured in an arrest. You don’t need to shield me from this or whatever you think you’re doing, it’s personal, that’s the point.”

Hannah opens her mouth like she’s going to say something, before shaking her head and opening the bright yellow door.

The second area hidden behind the yellow door is a long room, it’s completely open meaning everything can— well, see everything. There’s wooden flooring over the entire place, with a carpeted area at the back. The carpeted area at the back seems to be more of a children’s play area, with toys and stuffed animals. There are some children back there, who seem to be playing a rather intense game, a little girl has found a small crate and is addressing her fellow children brethren.

On the far left side there is what seems to be a pretty big industrial kitchen, there are people mulling about in there and what looks like a pretty big serving of soup being prepared. Someone looks over at them, before giving a small wave.

Hannah waves back, stepping around Techno.

In front of him are a bunch of tables, there’s a couple of people surrounded around them, mostly teenagers. There’s a group of teenagers on one of the tables that have dragged four

tables together to make a super table, they're not doing anything in particular, seemingly just talking. There's a couple of people scattered around at the tables with papers scattered everywhere and the look that only a student leading up to finals can get.

Hannah shoots someone a wave before approaching the back of the room, she steps over one of the toddlers laying on the floor screaming.

She approaches the dollhouse towards the back of the play area that two kids are sitting in front of.

"And then Marabelle kills you—" one of the kids says, before beating the other kid's doll with their own.

"Marabelle doesn't kill me!" the other kids yells, "because I have a forcefield that kills Marabelle."

The first kid gasps.

"Hey Jackson, hello Miya."

"Hi Miss Hannah."

"I'm going to need you to move," she says, "we have a visitor who would very much like the look at the dollhouse."

Both eyes snap over to Techno, with the disdain directed at someone who has ruined your life, not someone who just wants to get into a dollhouse. Miya, the little girl with long red hair scowls, snatching her dolls away like Techno wants them. Jackson sticks his tongue out at him.

Techno is beyond understanding why children are like this.

Both kids scatter off to play with another kid.

"Is this like a daycare?" Techno squints at the ratio of children to adults.

"A little, yeah," Hannah crouches down, putting her hands on either side of the dollhouse, "it's mainly used by single parents or parents where both of them work— we don't charge and we don't have super long waitlists, we feed them fairly nutritious food and do lessons with them. We also have after school tutors for some kids who are struggling or just high school students who have gotten a bit overwhelmed."

Techno looks back at the group of teenagers around the table.

A place like this when he was younger might have saved him from— what his life has become now. And it's not that Techno would trade his life now for the chance at a peaceful life, it's more—

Mourning. Mourning for the life that could've been if Techno had a chance to get an education, mourning for the life that he could've gotten if he wasn't in a fighting ring for

years, the chance of a life that was taken away from him when he was so young.

Techno wipes his eyes with the back of his hand as Hannah looks at him, expression curious.

“What?” Techno snaps.

Hannah shrugs, then pulls the dollhouse to the side.

Underneath the dollhouse is a metal trapdoor that Techno hasn’t seen before. It has a small scanning device on the edge of it, Hannah reaches down and puts her hand against the side of the scanning device.

There’s a small beep and the trapdoor flings open quickly enough that it smacks Techno in the face. Techno cries out— it doesn’t hurt as such, more just shocking him. He glances over at Hannah who is trying to keep her face calm and professional.

“This’ll take you straight through to Bad’s office,” Hannah whispers, “me showing you this is a huge security risk— you’re not allowed to tell *anyone* about this. You only get to know because—”

“Because?”

Hannah glances over her shoulder, “because you’re an ally Elysium has been trying to get onside for years, because you’re one of us, there’s a bunch of reasons.”

Techno snorts, “never joining Elysium, thanks for the offer though.”

Hannah crosses her arms, tilting her head to the side a little bit, “you wouldn’t even consider it?”

“Of course I’ve considered it,” Techno rolls his eyes, “my answer is no.”

And like that he starts clambering into the tunnel that the trapdoor leads on to. There’s a ladder down, which Techno starts climbing down, really hoping he doesn’t fall down it— because that would be incredibly embarrassing.

Hannah doesn’t say anything else, just crossing her arms and watching him go. When Techno is far enough down the ladder that connects, Hannah closes the trapdoor with a slam.

Techno’s feet hit the floor of something as the light from above snuffs out, plunging him into pitch blackness.

Then a few lights flicker along the edges of the walls, revealing a mostly concrete tunnel that Techno now realises— could easily be a trap. He’s not sure… what kind of trap and this feels like a lot of work to trap him.

Still, being cautious has kept him alive this far.

He keeps one hand against the smooth concrete as he moves down the tunnel. The lights littering the bottom half of the wall are very dull, and probably battery operated, but Techno

can’t be sure of it.

They’re embedded into the wall pretty well and provide (thankfully) enough light for Techno to move through.

Elysium is an incredibly tempting offer, and he knows that’s by design. He also knows that he would be a valuable and important fit, he has connections to the heroes and he’s from Logstedchire— there’s this thing inside of him that almost forces him to be loyal to Elysium before the hero committee.

But— over all of that there’s something in him fundamentally loyal to Tommy. And maybe he could help Tommy while being an Elysium member— and maybe that would be fine, but what if Techno was convinced Theseus’s power was too great?

And he just… can’t do that to Tommy, can’t persuade him to become Theseus to help Logstedchire or Elysium or whatever cause of the week wants him. With Elysium on board… it would all become slightly harder.

What is it worth to help Logstedchire if he can’t keep his favourite person *from* Logstedchire safe? They want to protect the children of Logstedchire and L’Manberg as a whole? Techno can’t doom Tommy.

But still… it’s tempting. It’s an attractive offer.

If he was perhaps any weaker, or any stronger, he might even take it.

But for now Techno is the way that he is, and that means walking through a weird concrete tunnel with the hope that Techno’s old friend is on the other side of this thing. Eventually he reaches what looks like the end of the tunnel and a huge lever next to it.

Techno checks over his shoulder. Nothing.

Then pulls the lever.

The wall opens up to reveal the inside of a pretty big office. There’s a large table in the centre of the room, along with a window that takes up the entire far wall, showing a view down on Reddings Street. On people moving around and talking, and of the various community gardens and shops that are here.

Reddings has always been beautiful, it was beautiful the first time Techno came to Redding Street after his own hybrid transformation, but now, even from behind glass it is *breathtaking,* everything is so much more green with flowers sprouting out of everything creating a cacophony of colour climbing up the side of old brick buildings, ivy hanging off everything and hanging gardens drooping from a lot of the overhangs and bridges that have since been built in Reddings Street.

People move down on the street below, with horns and tails and claws and some people missing limbs and chunks of their faces but no one even gives it a second look. A home for the blue hybrids— and anyone else who needs it now.

Hunching over the table, facing away from Techno and also looking out the window is Bad.

Bad is a fundamentally eerie looking man, it's no fault of his own, Techno can recognise that, it's the two blue hybrid transformations that Bad was forced to go under when he was a relatively young child.

First of all he is incredibly tall— Techno is not *short* by any means, Bad is still about a head taller than him. His skin is midnight black, with two thin horns that stick out of the front of his forehead, with scarring and ugly markings from where they grew unnaturally.

The scariest thing about Bad though are the bright white eyes that have no details in them. While Techno can't see them right now, because Bad is facing away. Every time he has made eye contact with Bad over the years he has felt his soul being judged.

However, there is something deeply funny about seeing this demon and wither hybrid crouched over a map of some kind in what can only be described as pajamas, with fluffy white pants that have little red hearts across it, and a light pink jumper with incredibly thick and fluffy socks.

"Hullo," Techno says.

Bad, in all honesty, jumps so much that Techno has to actively stop himself from laughing.

He actually screams, falling over to the side and hitting against the table, before ricocheting off the table and hitting the floor. Bad is then holding his heart, looking up at Techno with wide eyes as he wheezes for breath.

"You— you—" Bad reaches for the nearest thing on the table, he manages to grab a couple of pens and throws them at Techno, "you scared the— heck out of me."

"Heck?" Techno repeats, "you seriously still don't have this whole not swearing thing?"

"I work with children!"

"Yeah and the children probably swear more than you."

"How did you— how did you even get in here?" Bad screeches, "only Hannah can access that—"

"Hannah let me in, get up off the floor we need to talk."

Bad must see something serious in Techno's face, because he blinks a few times before using his arm to haul himself up back to his full height. Still about a head taller than Techno, turns out Techno's blue hybrid growth spurts have been for nothing.

"Are you alright?"

"Seems I keep coming here about Theseus," Techno laughs, it's not funny but he needs to laugh or he's going to cry, "um— so. A couple of days ago he said he thought blue powers him— like his powers, I said that was fucking ridiculous because that's not how powers work

even slightly. He kinda argued with me then avoided me— and then he was stabbed with blue. Type two."

Bad's face is generally pretty hard to read, but his mouth is open and his eyes are wide. Getting wider with every word Techno says.

"Of course— we didn't know that so we were just checking for any sign of blue transformation— they don't think they've found any but the head healer pulled me aside and gave me this because—"

He takes the hybrid genetics report out of his pocket and drops it on the table in front of Bad.

Bad slowly picks it up.

Then he gasps, drops the report and sits down in the seat he's had half pulled out this entire time.

"Is he going to die? Would— just a little bit of blue be enough to kill him with genetics like that?"

Bad shakes his head, but still holds his hand over his mouth as he stares at the report in front of him, "that— that shouldn't be possible."

"I know."

"He should be dead."

"I also know that. The doctor said uh— well they didn't really find any traces of blue in his body… he might've just… absorbed it all?"

"Huh," Bad stares at the report for a few more seconds, "that means blue worked as it was intended."

"Huh?"

Bad runs a hand down the side of his face before hunching forwards over the paper, "we're pretty sure blue was made to make heroes more powerful until it failed. We've known kids are more likely to survive a blue hybrid transformation. And— we also knew in theory that this would work, that you could keep compounding these powers on each other until it made someone ridiculously powerful."

Techno nods, "why didn't they try it?"

"Too unethical even for them," Bad slides the report across the table to Techno, "they tried it on a couple of kids, two of them died and it was… not good. So they stopped further experimentation on kids when it came to that."

Bad sighs tiredly, shuffling back in his seat so he's more leaning against it than anything.

"He thinks his powers work *because* of blue, like— they power him up or something."

“Perhaps an adverse effect of his powers? They’re too powerful to be sustained by a singular life force normally? Theseus is unheard of in almost all aspects— it’s not super unreasonable to guess that things are odd with his powers. Blue might reactivate these genes that stay mostly dormant and in effect strengthen his powers.”

Techno sighs, slumping over the table and burying his head in his arms.

Bad sighs, leaning back in his chair slightly, “over a decade ago there was an incident in North-East Logstedchire. That was one of the areas in particular ravaged by blue, it was one of the areas where the fighting with Ordos Theoritas were, you know this.”

Techno looks up slowly, nodding his head.

He remembers the fighting between Ordo Theoritas and a few other vigilante groups at the time.

And he also knows that Bad, while not officially affiliated with any of those groups, did not let any of them take Techno into the fighting, despite how powerful he was. Bad was still looking after him even years after.

“It was… horrific,” Bad whispers, “seeing North-East Logstedchire after it all. Thousands of factory workers were laid off, people were dying from the cold overnight. People from research labs, people from Logstedchire were getting fired from government jobs out of the fear of spies. And amidst all of that, the Sygrove’s house blew up.”

“Sygrove?”

“A child’s powers went out of control, all three members of the family were found dead inside. People in the area knew the family, Cassandra and Seth Sygrove had worked at a hero research facility with Victor Sarafin before their son was born. They, however, lost their jobs. Then there were rumours about them trying to turn their child into a blue hybrid, to make him a hero so they could get themselves out of the situation.”

“And no one did anything?” Techno hisses, “people knew and no one fucking did anything?”

“What were we supposed to do?” Bad snaps, “CPS didn’t care, the heroes didn’t care. In fact, Tom Sygrove was at least being fed and had a place to live, there were hundreds if not thousands of kids who didn’t have that. Someone *tried* to take him away from his family, and the police were called.”

“Did you know the Sygrove’s?” Techno asks, “his parents. Did you know his parents?”

“I have them to thank for these,” he taps on his right horn, an unreadable expression on his face.

“Does he look like them?”

“I don’t see why that’s relevant.”

“He looks more like his mum,” Bad says, “he doesn’t act like either of them. He’s a good person, or if he’s not I think he tries to be… that’s more than a lot of us can say.”

“How did he— survive it?”

Bad sighs, “that’s why— I didn’t think Theseus *was* Tom Sygrove, there were whispers around it and I just thought… I don’t know what I thought. His parents were scientists, they might’ve found a way to make it more stable— he could’ve just been lucky. If his parents did find a way to stabilise it, that formula never reached the public.”

“Thank fuck,” Techno whispers.

He buries his face in his hands, taking a few deep breaths as he wills himself not to cry about the entire situation, “they did it so Tommy could become a hero?”

“Lots of people did it at that time, I don’t know anyone who was successful, all of the people I knew who tried it died. People aren’t— themselves when they’re starving. This explains why his powers are like that. He won’t have other transformations. If he does have more transformations it’ll kill him and it’ll hurt probably the worst anything has ever hurt. Right now he’s okay… but this’ll make his powers stronger— out of control.”

“You think his powers might get out of control?”

“I *know* they’ll get out of control,” Bad lets go of Techno’s arm, the white marks starting to fade to a deeper red already, “there’s just— imagine a spring that’s been pressed down for a long time. As soon as you stop pressing on that spring it’ll explode up. Theseus’s powers are —” Bad takes a deep breath, running a hand down his face, “if I’m right, then this could be really, *really,* not good. The only thing in theory limiting his powers would be what his body could physically hold.”

Techno takes a deep breath, “his powers could kill him?”

“If he overused them? Easily.”

And Techno is not afraid easily, he gets afraid, sure. There’s something about Tommy existing that makes Techno feel so fucking terrified for him. Terrified because people want Tommy dead, terrified because Tommy’s own powers want him dead.

Having Tommy walk around feels like Techno’s heart living and existing outside of his own body. The easiest way to destroy Techno is to destroy Tommy.

That terrifies him.

How easy it is for something to become broken in him if Tommy is hurt, how easily he’d let it happen.

“How do I— how do I stop that? I can’t—” Techno takes a deep breath, trying to get all of the desperation through his eyes that he’s feeling. Trying to put every bit of despair and horror he feels about this into his face, hoping that Bad will understand even a fraction of it, “I can’t lose him.”

Bad's expression shows nothing but sympathy. His face softens after he sees *something* in Techno's eyes, he gives a gentle sigh.

"Don't let him come back," Bad whispers, "as Theseus— if he comes back as Theseus and starts using his powers at full capacity… Nelson-Jones will want him dead, his powers might want him dead— it's *so* dangerous."

"There's a way to dampen his powers," Techno blurts it out before he can stop himself, "someone at the tower developed it. It's a power suppressor technology but it shuts his powers off completely— that's why he went away, I think. I can—"

Bad inhales, "getting rid of a power so intertwined with someone is like killing them in a way. It's a piece of yourself being removed without permission."

And Techno can't even begin to imagine how intertwined Tommy's power and himself are, how they're inextricably linked and no matter how hard you pull trying to remove them from the other just… doesn't work.

But more than that, Tommy lived through it once.

And even more than that, Tommy can't die.

Techno just refuses it.

Tommy has to live, and Techno would burn down the fucking world to make that happen.

"If I have to choose between him dying with his powers or living without them, I'm choosing the option where he lives," it's not much louder than a whisper.

Bad's face contorts into annoyance before he nods his head a few times, "I— I'd do the same for my own."

"You have a kid?"

Bad nods, "he's quite little, he's only eight or so. I love him more than anything and would— he has to live, no matter what."

"He's not really my kid—"

Bad just tilts his head to the side a little bit, amusement playing on his face, "you might not be his *father* or anything, family is way more complicated than that. I think you love him so much that you would let it ruin you."

Techno just looks at him.

"In fact, I think you'd welcome it ruining you if it meant that he was okay," Bad gives a small smile, "I think he's your kid, Techno."

And maybe that's it, there's not a simple word that will ever describe what Tommy is to him — Tommy is his brother and friend and son and— he's Techno's kid, because there's no other

word to describe it and any other label doesn't do it justice.

Bad grabs his arm.

Techno is strong, but the grip *hurts* .

He looks up to meet Bad's pupilless eyes.

There's desperation in his eyes and Techno can't help but fail to breathe for a few moments— him and Bad have never been desperate like this. They've always been the strongest, there's been nothing worth fighting for like this before.

"You can not tell anyone about this," Bad whispers, "anyone— if this gets out…" Bad shudders, "the things both sides would do with it would kill hundreds, if we're lucky."

"Elysium would use this?"

Bad opens and closes his mouth a few times before he just nods, "some… important Elysium members are trying to prepare for all-out war, it took someone very smart to talk them down from it."

Techno takes a deep breath, "okay. I can do that."

"You should go and be with your kid when he wakes up," Bad says with a slight smile, "he's going to be okay as long as you're there. Help him control his powers, bring him here if it gets too hard— there's people who could help here. And— keep your kid out of whatever is about to go down. I have a feeling it's not going to be… pretty."

There's people yelling and a general level of chaos running away from where the smoke is billowing up. Purpled darts around them with an expertise only recently gained from running around protests.

He loses sight of Baghera quickly, cursing underneath his breath as he stands up straighter trying to see her again. However, Purpled isn't overly tall and can't see over the heads and chaos of all of it.

Purpled knows the layout of this place well enough— he knows about the alley out to the left side of it, and he knows that'll be the quickest way into the building. He also knows that the chances that Elysium hit any busy areas in the Hall of Heroes is quite low.

Still… there's a nagging fear that Purpled has put in *so* much work and Elysium have been virtually silent for months only to go and fuck up the tentative peace that's been found in Logstedchire.

And someone dying would really fuck all of that up—

Purpled manages to tear away from the crowd heading towards him, as he presses himself against one of the walls in the square. He looks around for a few moments at the people bustling pass, there are a few people with large facemasks and thick black hoodies.

This really, truly, is too much effort for him.

He takes off again, shooting for the alley next to the hall. He knows that there's a couple of food places on the alley— normally pretentious hipster food places that are mostly a tourist trap but also have pretty good food.

They're probably locked up though, if not everyone inside should be hiding at worst— ideally evacuated, and it's not like it's ridiculous to see a teenage boy break a window and climb through the side of the Hall of Heroes.

That's probably fine.

The alleyway is in fact clear, with all of the hipster places very much closed.

The window is in fact still intact, and Purpled knows that breaking this window is going to start some sort of alarm system, but Purpled *also* knows that with the building probably half exploded and maybe on fire— that's probably okay.

Purpled scans around the alleyway.

There's a window slightly higher up that'll lead into the Hero Hall, Purpled *thinks* it leads into a bathroom but he's not super sure about it. Either way the window is relatively small— about Purpled sized, and good enough.

He spies a metal rubbish bin outside one of the pretentious hipster cafe places, which is good enough and will break the window—

With a small grunt that he will never admit to doing, he picks up the bin. The lid isn't on that securely, so Purpled will be throwing rubbish all over the ground, and maybe he feels a little bad about that but at the end of the day the option of… people dying, is probably worse than some mild littering.

There's the noise of metal banging against the ground—

Which Purpled resolutely remembers from that night on the roof with Charlie, the clang of metal is eerily familiar to that night.

Purpled drops the bin to the ground and turns his head towards the noise—

Bang.

For a moment Purpled's brain stops.

He's not in his Purpled gear, he's Daniel Greyson, a security guard at the tower. Half of his brain has the mind to drop— what he's supposed to do as a civilian while he's being shot at. But another part of his mind is *screaming* at him.

In this odd state between his brain being Purpled, the vigilante and Daniel Greyson, the civilian, all he can really do is look down at his chest.

The blood that is starting to seep through his hoodie.

He liked this hoodie.

The rain is even heavier now, Purpled is completely drenched, hair sticking to his forehead and his clothes sticking to his body. It hurts.

His chest burns, the blood is boiling against his skin. It's burning and twisting like Purpled's flesh is trying to burn the bullet that is now inside of him.

It burns.

His eyes snap to the figure standing at the open end of the alley— the way Purpled had just run from.

He opens his mouth to say anything, to do literally anything—

Bang.

His blood is boiling inside of him, his flesh is burning it's all burning and his head is spinning and there's no exit wound and he doesn't know if that's good and— *fuck* it all hurts so badly. Blood is covering his entire front, his hands, he can feel it dripping around his chest and through onto his back and he's on the ground now why is he on the ground?

Fuck.

Someone is standing above him, they're speaking. Purpled doesn't know what they're saying. He does know they're holding a gun.

The gun is levelled at his forehead, and Purpled does everything he can to focus his eyes on the man standing above him.

He's tall and muscular, he also has a prosthetic arm which looks ramshackled and not medically approved at all. In fact, it looks like it's too small considering how big this man's arms are. He is also incredibly bald— and maybe that would make Purpled feel better but he's about to get shot in the face by a bald man.

His hands on instinct reach up and curl around the barrel.

He tries to push the gun away, but this man is stronger than he is and the gun is kept level at his face.

"Please," Purpled chokes out, he doesn't even know if he's talking because his entire body is burning.

He lets go of the barrel of the gun, planting both of his hands on the ground and managing to shuffle himself away. He knows that there's blood underneath him creating an ugly smear as he tries to get away.

His shoulder hits something, and Purpled manages to sit himself up, his back leaning against a wall or something. Pressing both hands to his wounds makes pain shoot through his entire body from it. His eyes roll backwards with the pain but he knows he needs to stop the bleeding.

And he doesn't have any weapons on him, one of the few times he doesn't actually have any weapons on him. It's just him, and someone who is clearly trained with a gun, Purpled wouldn't be shocked if he was some sort of professional.

It's so much blood.

Purpled doesn't even know how big the exit wounds are, he doesn't know how much of his stomach and other organs have been torn through by these bullets. He doesn't imagine it's a particularly clean shot.

He's losing too much blood.

The average person has about five litres of blood in their body, this changes depending on height and weight. The average person can also lose about two litres of blood before they're almost confirmed to die.

There's so much blood.

Purpled doesn't know *what's* been hit, all he knows is his stomach is a bloody mess of bullets and flesh and torn jumper. He knows this isn't good— he *knows* this isn't good. And he knows he should be screaming for help but… his mouth won't open, any attempt is dying in his throat and becoming a ragged breath.

Maybe if he can use his powers for once— maybe that'll give him time to run or something *or something* because he doesn't want to die— but this is looking really, really, really bad for him and he doesn't have anything else to do.

So for the first time in months Purpled meets someone's eyes.

The assassin has brown eyes, tired eyes that hold lifetimes of pain and—

And for a moment he's a lot of things— *he's a father and he's fighting a hero and he's holding a child that isn't his but now he has to look after, and he's making a deal that he shouldn't and there's so much guilt, there's so much guilt but it's all for his kids and he's making dinner. He's sitting on a hill with the only man he'll ever love like this and he's laughing with his kids there's more of them now and he's fighting another hero and he's fighting and he's fighting and he's a child staring at himself in the mirror—*

Purpled is thrown out of the emotions and memories the assassin— the killer— whatever he is, is feeling. His head reels with the confusion of it all— guilt but the sureness in him, it's too much for Purpled and his head aches.

It barely makes the man flinch.

And like that, the final gambit Purpled has is over. His powers didn't do nearly enough and Purpled is probably going to die, bullet through the head if the assassin is kind, blood loss if he's not.

"Huh," the man standing above him says, "you're an empath. Your file lied."

And Purpled wants to scream because he hates his powers and he hates this and he hates that he can't look people in the eyes and he hates all of this and he's so—

He's so fucking tired of it all.

"It's all for your kids, huh?" Purpled breathes out, it's barely more than a whisper but the man hears it, "it would've been nice to have a parent like that."

And it would've been nice— if Purpled didn't know what unconditional love felt like until he was sixteen, and it would've been nice if Purpled knew his parents. It would've been nice if Purpled got a lot of things.

But despite it all… what he did get was fun.

It was fun to be one of the people wrapped up in Tommy's life— to be one of the people that Tommy dragged into a home and a sense of belonging that he made out of nothing. Tommy has a lot of powers, but maybe the most important one is being able to build homes out of nothing.

It was fun, to sit on floors and drink juice boxes, to argue about fighting alligators, to spend nights up on the rooftops of Logstedchire talking about everything and nothing. Being a teenager with someone was fun, being carried around across Logstedchire's roofs while Tommy used his powers was fun.

No, Purpled didn't get the family he always wanted— but he got this family, and it was fun and he's loved and he loved other people and—

Purpled was happy. He wasn't alone.

"Please…" is about all Purpled can manage between wheezing breaths, "just let me go home."

The gun is levelled back at his forehead.

He was happy. He was alive. A life filled with trial after trial and loneliness and he had scrambled back to a place that he was content in— he was happy.

He was happy with Tommy and Techno and Aimsey and Sniff and talking to Slime and eating burritos and making lunch for work in the apartment he shared with his best friend.

Even the worst times weren't *bad* times because Purpled knew he wasn't alone again, he knew that things were going to work out because he wasn't alone again. He spent so much of his life afraid of people and connection and maybe that's the thing that's going to kill him now. Maybe it's caring for people that put him in this fucking alleyway chasing after Baghera

Jones for reasons he still can't articulate, maybe that's what led to the bullets in his body and no feeling in one of his arms.

Is he supposed to regret any of it? Because he doesn't—

And it's a beautiful and terrible thing, to want it to turn out any other way but know deep, deep down that you wouldn't change any of it.

But you die the way you lived and Purpled is alone.

It's funny how things work out.

The echoing bang of a final gunshot.

Then nothing, only the sound of heavy rain beginning to wash the blood away.

Chapter End Notes

thank you for tuning into Act 1: Flickering!!!

conclusions

Chapter Summary

> "I think people underestimate the power that Theseus had both from himself and from the people… it's a hard thing to know if you weren't there, but the return of Theseus is one of those events your parents should remember— ask them where they were when they found out."

or, we enter act 2: alight

Chapter Notes

> I really wish that u could format ao3 like you could Wattpad without having to automatically number chapters, but, alas. You can not.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[Transcript Retrieved from the University of Logstedchire. Unit [HS103: Contemporary Logstedchire History]. Lecture: 'Theseus Introduction' by: Dr. Guqqie Willows-Teese 03/09/43]

WILLOWS: Before we get started I'd like to thank everyone who came out to this lecture today— I know it's just before midterm exams and I'm sure you have better things to be doing but I thank you nonetheless. This lecture is one of the more entertaining ones we have and I'm sure why you signed up for the unit. We've done most of the work to get to this point including the amendment to the vigilante act and the various laws they put in place. In these conditions is where Theseus rose from.

WILLOWS: Now— what do you know about Theseus? Call out!

SPEAKER 2: My parents talk about him a lot.

WILLOWS: And that makes perfect sense they were probably about your age when Theseus was particularly prevalent, and if you're from Logstedchire they were probably incredibly politically active.

SPEAKER 3: He was from North-East Logstedchire.

WILLOWS: Yes he was! Does someone know why that's significant?

SPEAKER 4: North-East Logstedchire was particularly hit by the influx of blue into the community and the standard of living there was much lower than the rest of the country— even by Logstedchire standards at the time.

WILLOWS: Also correct!

SPEAKER 5: He had ties with Elysium.

WILLOWS: Now *that* is a complex question we spend a week on. The long and short of it is— kind of.

SPEAKER 2: He was one of the strongest powered people we've ever seen— I think he's like a nine on the scale?

WILLOWS: He is an eight-point-eight, but the scale wasn't around when he was active *and* the scale doesn't really account for how diverse his power sets were as much as it should— if you modify it slightly based on how adaptable his powers were most people place it at a nine-point-two. And *that* score has not been beaten yet— on record, the interesting thing about Theseus is he largely avoided most formal government protocols in his childhood, so there very much may be another Theseus around.

WILLOWS: That was so incredibly not the point. The point is now we're going to run the quickest activity in the world so everyone can get a grasp of the various preknowledge this class holds. If you're comfortable with it, put your hand up if you're from Logstedchire.

WILLOWS: Okay, that is more of you than I was expecting. About sixty percent of the class— now keep your hand up if a relative or someone close to you has a personal story about Theseus. An uncle he saved from a mugging, a grandparent he helped cross the street. Alright… that's about fifty percent, you're good to put your hands down.

WILLOWS: Now, an interesting thing about that— while it's hard to run statistics on how much each specific vigilante did. There's a lot of averages and guessing and work from old social media sites that have to be done, but on average Slime and Purpled helped people a lot more than Theseus did. So everyone remembers Theseus, your parents remember him, your grandparents probably do. But removing him from the context of the Logstedchire Four is one of the worst decisions anyone who teaches contemporary history in this country has ever made. You don't have Theseus without the Logstedchire Four.

WILLOWS: So the Logstedchire Four are *the* defining vigilante group of this era, they were really the only traditional vigilante group around this time due to a bunch of laws and crackdowns on vigilantes by the heroes. Most people know Theseus, most people know Purpled and then around Aurelian and Slime it starts to get a little hazy— Slime is however also a leftover from a previous vigilante group so he was in the game for… decades.

WILLOWS: Alright… now a harder question to answer. What do you know about Purpled, because he often tends to get left out of the high school classes because he is— a clusterfuck of connections and ties.

SPEAKER 3: He rarely used his actual powers?

WILLOWS: That is true! Based on a few things we're pretty sure his powers weren't anything to do with aim or accuracy like people thought at the time, but empathy and seeing people's memories. We're pretty sure he had some sort of wither skeleton genetics.

SPEAKER 4: Uh— one of the readings said that Purpled had connections to all sorts of people in Logstedchire's underworld… they talked a lot about connections he had to leadership in Elysium?

WILLOWS: Do you know why that is?

SPEAKER 4: Uh… not really, Professor.

WILLOWS: No problem at all, Carl. Purpled started out as a mercenary before he was a vigilante, which meant he kept a lot of… unsavoury connections that he was able to access. He had connections to Anemoi, the heroes, Elysium and of course, his most famous connection was to Theseus himself.

SPEAKER 5: What do you think is the biggest thing people forget when teaching about Theseus?

WILLOWS: While you shouldn't interrupt me while I'm lecturing… that was a very good question, so I will let it slide. Theseus has become more of a media legend than anything else, there's books and movies and thousands of words written about him. This is a first year class— so assuming you came straight out of high school here most of

you are eighteen or nineteen. All of you are about two or three years older than Theseus was when he was making the decisions he was— we don't know his exact age but he was younger than all of you.

WILLOWS: I know picking a topic to write on for your first assignment is difficult, but imagine being put under the sort of stress that came with trying to navigate the highly complex socio-political dynamics that shook out in Logstedchire, while being so much younger. I think people underestimate the power that Theseus had both from himself and from the people… it's a hard thing to know if you weren't there, but the return of Theseus is one of those events your parents should remember— ask them where they were when they found out.

SPEAKER 4: Where were you Professor?

WILLOWS: I was on the train coming back from university. My friends had found some information on uh… a research project we were doing at the time. I opened my phone and saw the news, then when I got off the train— I also lived in Logstedchire then, by the way, things had gone… chaotic as fuck.

Chapter End Notes

one of my jobs is writing transcripts for my uni (i got a writing job look at me go) and it felt very nice to write a transcript about the history of the fake country I love so much. And some… little… tiny teeny glances into how things pan out 22 years into the future of L'Manberg. Logstedchire doesn't have a university at the current time btw.

weakness

Chapter Summary

> And for a second Tommy gets to feel like a kid again, wrapped up in someone else's arms and being told that everything will be okay. Maybe it will be okay—maybe he can be a kid for a little bit longer and hold onto that.
>
> Techno doesn't break promises to him.

or, i don't really have a fun snappy thing to say in this chapter

Chapter Notes

> HI! Hope you enjoy! I don't have a lot more to say apart from soon I might end up skipping a week just because of uni starting and my writing schedule slowing down. OKAY TY LOVE YOU BYE

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tommy is floating. He doesn't know where he's floating, only that he's floating. His entire body is weightless. Nothing hurts, nothing feels *good,* there is just… nothing apart from weightlessness

His eyes open slowly, like there's resistance in them. His eyelids drag down every time he tries to open them, until he manages it.

He has no clue where he is or what he's doing. Everything around him is black, there's no definition of any kind, no textures or differences… just the feeling of Tommy sinking into a liquid of some kind.

It's not water, but it resists his movement as he tries to get upright. He turns over his own body a few times, trying to tell up from down in a space that has nothing.

Then there's a flash of red around him and Tommy's eyes dart over to where the source of it is.

Not all too far from him, is a tangled ball of lightning that zaps out, lighting up this space somehow. There's nothing else to see about whatever void he's found himself floating in, Tommy just knows that the lightning lights up everything.

He looks at his hands and he can see them.

Everything feels heavy here, like his bones and muscles and blood weighs more and he's trying to wade through how blurry and fuzzy he feels about all of it.

The ball of lightning surges out, different lines of lightning whipping towards his face until they form into something that looks like the shape of a person—

Then more and more details as the lightning fades into a familiar person and—

Tommy's mum always looked like him, Tommy knows better than anyone he inherited his father's cold eyes. There were weeks when Tommy could almost see his eyes morphing into his father's, staring down at him with both the hope he always seemed to hold for Tommy and the judgement he also always had for Tommy.

He always looked more like his mum though, with a round face and a small nose. They both have small birthmarks on their shoulders, and both of them liked to laugh. His mum's hair was barely blonde when Tommy remembers her, it was light brown with golden parts where the sun would bleach it during the summer.

And so… Tommy finds himself staring at the familiar face of Cassandra Sygrove.

They look alike, Tommy *knew* they looked alike when they were young, but now he's more familiar with his own face.

He looks like his mum.

"I'm dreaming this," Tommy says to no one in particular, "you're dead. I killed you."

"You did."

"I should be dead," Tommy screws his eyes shut, "if this is the afterlife and we float around in red goop forever I'm going to be so mad."

"Your friends are competent," Cassandra says, "they care for you— did you ever really doubt that they'd find you? Did you really doubt they wouldn't fight for you?"

And Tommy doesn't— he never did. He knew as soon as he smashed that necklace Techno would come running, and he knows that if he had a similar thing for Purpled he would've run, he knows Aimsey and Sniff and Tubbo and Ranboo and so many people interwoven into Tommy's life would have run and fought and fought to keep him alive.

"I'll have my powers back," Tommy whispers, "whether I want them or not. You did that. I hope you're fucking happy."

"Sweetheart… I'm also you… I didn't do anything to you."

"If you're me then you did plenty of shit to me," Tommy snaps right back, because Tommy's truest enemy has always been himself.

Tommy stares at Cassandra, a version of her frozen in time. If she lived longer would she have gotten grey hairs, would she have wrinkles around her eyes and on her forehead? Would she have learnt that she needed to be a better mother?

With a sigh, Tommy leans back away from her.

“Do you think she thought she was doing the right thing?” Tommy asks, looking at the facsimile of his mother that his brain has created, “that she actually thought that it would get us out of Logstedchire?”

A long moment of silence as Cassandra looks at him, “does it matter?”

“It would be easier for me to forgive her if she thought she was doing it for the better.”

A gentle sigh, it sounds so much kinder than anything his mum ever actually directed at him, “well you’re never going to know, Tommy. Because she’s dead, and you killed her, and even if you hadn’t killed her, something would’ve given eventually. Do you really think you would’ve made it out of that alive?”

“I don’t know,” Tommy says, because he doesn’t know, he’s never had any way *of* knowing.

Were his parents really that awful that the only way he would’ve lived was if they died?

Was there another world where none of this happened, and Tommy lived normally— where he went to highschool parties and graduated at a normal time and did normal highschooler things? Or was there always something in him that’s doomed and rotten?

“I wish I could’ve been normal.”

Cassandra sighs, hand reaching out and cupping the side of Tommy’s face.

He leans into it.

Tommy knows it’s all in his head, he knows that he’s making it up— and *wow* isn’t it sad if he’s imagining his mum holding him and for it to not hurt for once.

“Thomas Sygrove,” Cassandra whispers, “you weren’t born special… you were made special by horrible people who loved you so much and yearned for a better life so much that it destroyed you.”

He leans into the touch. It’s gentle.

It feels so nice to be held like he’s worthy of gentleness.

“I’ve only ever wanted to be normal,” Tommy whispers.

“But you’re not normal.”

“I’m afraid.”

It's a confession to himself more than anything, he knows that this Cassandra in his head isn't her, he also knows hearing nice things from her might be able to fix that little broken thing inside of his chest.

"You've always been afraid, Tommy," Cassandra says, "did running from it all make you less afraid?"

No.

Running from Theseus didn't make him less afraid, running from his past didn't make him less afraid, running from himself and his loved ones and everything that's ever hurt him didn't make him less afraid.

He's always been… so, so, *so* fucking afraid.

"Logstedchire needs you."

"Logstedchire needs Theseus."

"You can't divide those two things from each other," Cassandra says, "you are Theseus and Theseus is you— you and your friends dividing them because, you, Thomas Underscore is more palatable and easier to understand doesn't mean that they're two different entities."

"You're wiser in my brain than you were when I knew you."

"I am your brain."

"Well, then I'm really fucking clever."

"You've always known these things, Tommy," Cassandra laughs, and Tommy has missed that sound so much without even realising it, "sometimes it's easier to have someone else tell you."

Tommy sighs, "this is gonna suck."

"Probably."

And yeah… it's going to suck because doing anything difficult always sucks. This is going to suck because Tommy's never really wanted this— this is going to suck for so many reasons, but Tommy also knows it's what he's supposed to do.

It's the right thing to do and he hates that he's so sure about that.

He looks at his mum— who isn't really his mum, for what will be the last time. Unless he gets drugged again and forced to endure a really specific drug induced dream where he imagines his mum which… isn't as out of the realm of possibility as Tommy would like.

She still looks young— younger than any picture Tommy creates in his mind of her now. And yeah— he knows none of this is real, but for a moment it feels real and it's nice.

He pushes away from Cassandra.

His entire body wades through the— whatever is around them, all of his limbs weigh down. Everything hurts to move— everything is a fight against the current hitting against him. His limbs fail as he tries to push forwards.

The lightning arcs around him, and Tommy pushes.

Luckily for him— it's something he's good at. He's good at fighting and pushing and doing what it takes to survive— and he's going to do what it takes to survive… even if it involves swimming through a void towards a red ball of lightning.

His fingers claw into the emptiness of the void around him, as each time he reaches forward he inches closer and closer to the ball of lightning.

The lightning crackles off as he inches closer and closer. Everything aches as Tommy gets closer.

The force is even more now, each little bit he moves closer it feels like he has to dig his hands into whatever substance this void is made out of. His fingers and hands each time come out dripping with black oozing liquid.

Bursts of lightning hit Tommy's arms and face, each place the lightning hits arcs pain through his entire body. He pushes forwards more, his arm covered in black liquid that he doesn't want to think about too much.

Lightning is hitting him as he gets closer—

Until— he can just about reach out his hand.

His hand manages to make contact with the arcing ball of lightning in front of him.

The lightning crackles a little closer to him, it dances around his fingers and hands and arms as he surges closer and closer to the ball of crackling lightning. It's roaring in his ears from the sheer energy of it all.

It doesn't hurt, it feels similar to a blanket being wrapped around your shoulders.

The buzzing in his head gets louder and louder until it is screaming at him. He tries to pull his arm away, but nothing relents and his arm stays stuck.

For a second it's agonising pain, as his entire body tries to tear itself apart with the force of it all. Tommy holds and grasps and fumbles for whatever he can grab of himself and hold it together as his entire body aches and rips and tears and feels it should fall apart.

Then he's falling backwards, his stomach and brain free falling as he falls through nothingness. His eyes aren't even open, he just recognises the feeling of falling the way someone familiar with a knife to their throat recognises a dull blade.

He falls and tumbles and twists over and over and over himself again and again and again in this darkness.

Then he slams into something.

Red lightning curls across his closed eyelids, seeping into the edge of his vision that sees nothing. It takes up more and more and more until all he can see is the bright flash of red that nearly feels like home and—

And Tommy wakes up.

There's nothing slow or graceful about it, one second he's floating in the nothingness and the next he's sitting up in a hospital ward he doesn't recognise, wires and various things attached to his arm.

There's the gentle beeping of a heart monitor, general movement around him. Tommy turns his head to the side.

Phil is sitting in the chair next to the bed, and relief fills Tommy's body. Phil is safe. He's safe. He's alive.

Red lightning still clouds his vision, the crackles of it around the corner of his eyes.

He blinks it away and it fades to nothing.

Phil's here.

Purpled and Techno aren't though.

"Where's Techno?"

And maybe if Tommy wasn't still so out of it he would be able to recognise the worry in Phil's voice, maybe if his grasp on reality wasn't currently… slippery, he would be able to understand what's happening. But— he's still feeling floaty and not in the world.

"He's uh— dealing with something else right now."

"Huh," is what Tommy manages. It makes sense, Techno has a lot of shit to deal with on a regular basis, let alone the potential fallout of whatever just happened.

His eyes grow heavy again, crackles of red once again in his vision.

He's asleep before he hits the pillow again.

Tubbo has long learnt that his survival is mostly a fluke. Especially now that Kiera Kingston has decided she's hellbent on making Tubbo a traitor to his class and ideology and everything that he's ever stood for.

Still, he is brought back to his cell before Pac is.

When Pac walks back into the cell a few hours later, he audibly gasps, rushing forwards and grabbing Tubbo by the shoulders as he scans up and down him for any injuries, looking for cuts or bruises and finding none.

“I really thought you were… y’know,” Pac drags a thumb across his own throat then sticks his tongue out, “bleugh.”

“I’m fine,” Tubbo says, “I’m… yeah I’m fine.”

Pac leans back, giving a sigh of relief and holding his hand to his chest, “so what— what happened?”

Tubbo gives himself a few moments to… sit in the grief that he’s feeling in his chest. There’s a hollow part in his chest that has carved itself out and Tubbo doesn’t know what to do with it.

“Kingston made a deal,” Tubbo says with a laugh, the laugh beyond falls flat and they’re just left in the silence of it all.

Pac’s face does a couple of complicated things, “what— what kind of deal?”

“Uh,” Tubbo runs a hand down his face, “she wants help on… whatever she’s experimenting on. She thinks I’m some kind of super genius and automatically adept at everything I do— I don’t know shit about biology.”

“You knew about my powers,” Pac says quietly.

“Because healing powers are common. We did a thing about it in school— minor healing powers are some of the most common and it’s the one we most understand in science so far. Does she want me to do biochemistry? Biomedical engineering? I don’t know what those things are— I vaguely know genome sequencing but I don’t know how to fucking do it I just know that it exists.”

Pac gives him a look, “and what happens if you’re uh— not so good at this?”

“Seems I’m going to go missing, Pac.”

Pac’s face falls, his mouth fully falls open and he moves so he’s sitting on the bed next to Tubbo. Tubbo can’t do much more than appreciate the company, Pac just sits next to him quietly. There’s a heavy weight across the two of them.

It kind of hurts.

Tubbo doesn’t start crying, because he’s in prison and that’s embarrassing. His eyes do well up with tears and Tubbo keeps trying to stare straight ahead. Every time he sniffles, Pac's eyes snap over to him.

“Did I tell you how I met my partner?” Pac asks.

Tubbo glances over at him, “you have a partner?”

“Ah my… roommate,” Pac says with a fond smile, “we lived together most of our life.”

“Weird way to say homosexual lovers.”

Pac gives him a flat look, “it wasn’t like that.”

“Did you want it to be?” Tubbo finds himself asking before he can really stop himself.

“Uh—” Pac crosses his arms over his chest, looking back at the wall across from them, “I try not to think about it too much anymore… it just kinda makes me sad y’know? The amount of time we wasted being scared.”

“There will be more time. Once you’re out of here, you’re seeing Richas, remember.”

Pac laughs again, “I guess so Tubbo… I guess so. He may have gotten married.”

“I doubt it.”

“Maybe he’s married and perfectly in love with a man called— Eduardo,” Pac laments, putting the back of his hand against his forehead and pretending to faint. He flops onto the side of the bed, still looking at Tubbo.

“Do you reckon he’s waiting?” Tubbo asks, voice as gentle as he can keep it.

For a few seconds Pac’s expression turns a little bit softer.

He smiles, “yeah.”

“Yeah?”

“Mhm. One of the last conversations we had… before I came here… it was about waiting. I said I wouldn’t wait for him— as a joke, he knew that. He laughed and said that he’d wait until the next lifetime if he had to. I almost kissed him that night.”

“That’s kind of the most romantic thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Fit was always a bit awkward,” Pac is still smiling, the smile looks like it hurts though. It looks like the sort of thing that sinks through your chest and grabs onto your heart and tugs and tugs at it. “He always knew what to say when it counted… and it really counted then.”

“He seems like a good guy.”

“He is,” Pac says, “I think you’d get along quite well! I think you act a lot alike in stressful uh— times.”

Tubbo snorts, “guess we’ll get to find out, aye?”

“Do teenagers in Logstedchire still date?” Pac asks, “or is everything a bit too depressing and sad to be dating?”

Tubbo throws his arm over his face, “never really thought about it, boss. Not really into that sort of stuff and— it… always felt silly to even try and indulge in that kinda thing.”

“So you lived your life without any sort of love… best friends, siblings, friends…”

And Tubbo *knows* Pac isn’t stupid and knows that’s not what Tubbo meant remotely. He also knows that this seems to be some kind of attempt to get to know him better. Tubbo can’t really deny himself that.

If he’s going to die soon he wants to be known.

“Well, no, obviously not,” Tubbo snaps, “I— I had a pretty good group of friends. I had a really good friend, I kinda pushed him away because I was scared he’d get too close. Had another close friend, we almost ran to Canada together. Uh— was kinda raised by someone named Schlatt, he’s nice. Put all my trust into one of the bravest people I think I’ve met and it ended me up here.”

“Do you regret any of it?”

“No.”

“Did it ever feel a bit silly?”

“To care that much? Yeah, of course it did. I didn’t mind most of the time because they were my friends and I was theirs and I cared about them a lot. Always felt silly to wish for a normal life in Logstedchire.”

“I think it’s worth it though,” Pac says and his eyes aren’t quite here.

Pac’s eyes are wandering in a fond memory, they’re dancing in something gentler that Tubbo wishes he could see because even the way Pac’s eyes look thinking about it look gentle.

“Yeah,” Tubbo says, “it’s worth it.”

Tubbo barely sleeps that night, from both the conversation with Pac and then Pac’s snoring keeping him up— also the running thoughts about how his death feels more and more inevitable at any moment and all Tubbo can do is panic about it.

Tina and Bagi hide their surprise fairly well when Tubbo and Pac come into the cafeteria that morning. No one looks at Tubbo and Tubbo is grateful for that. He slams his tray on the table, having gotten a reasonable amount of scrambled eggs and sits down.

“You uh…” Bagi starts, “look really bad.”

Tubbo’s eyes just shoot up to glare at her.

“Jeez, jeez, alright, alright—” Bagi puts both of her hands up in the air.

Tubbo finishes his breakfast and gives himself what he is dubbing ‘table time’ which is when he faceplants onto the table and tries not to cry. It’s pretty gratifying all things considered.

The other three talk, and Tubbo lets the sound wash over him.

After breakfast two guards come to get Tubbo.

Bagi, Tina and Pac all look horrified for a second— Tina and Bagi manage to school their expressions but Pac can't quite do the same as Tubbo walks away. This time he is aware of people in the cafeteria looking at him.

The fact he's walking willingly seems to say a lot.

Tubbo isn't sure what exactly, but he doesn't particularly care to find out what this means to everyone else. He's made a deal with Kingston— if the other prisoners know that, that's fine he hopes they beat him to death in a dark corner before Kingston can get her guards to do it for them.

One of the guards scans a small card reader next to a door, before basically shoving Tubbo inside.

Immediately several pairs of eyes whip towards him. He is very clearly in a laboratory with ugly brown tiles and grey concrete walls. Ew.

The laboratory is a very quiet thing, there are a few people around in lab coats and with their hair pinned or tied out of their faces. It's incredibly quiet apart from the buzzing of various machinery and things.

There's plenty of people sitting at computers, most are wearing appropriate business casual clothes and two have lab coats on. There's three doors— one seems to lead to some kind of processing facility, one is labelled 'EXPERIMENTS' on the door, and Tubbo can't quite see through. The other door looks like it leads to a long and skinny room from what Tubbo can see, maybe a bathroom?.

In the main area there are plenty of computers and people hunched in front of them. There's a couple of people moving back and forth between the other rooms but otherwise the majority of people are here.

The computers are filled with the same letters being repeated time and time over as people sit in front of them frowning. There are six people sitting at various computers like this, frowning with coffee cups surrounding their desk.

'A', 'C', 'G', 'T'.

It looks like genome sequencing.

Tubbo doesn't… know a tonne about genome sequencing, he's more of a computer person than a biology person but the letters on the computer seem to be showing at least one genome sequence, and considering there's another tab of it next to it…

It looks like they're comparing genome sequences.

Why?

“Who’s that from?” Tubbo finds himself saying before he can really stop himself, and great, he’s going to actually get himself shot in the fucking face. Kiera Kingston’s shitty deal can only save him from so much bullshit because for someone who is so clever he is *so* fucking dumb all the time.

The scientist looks around, eyebrows raising slightly, “huh?”

“The genome sequencing you’re very obviously doing— and now comparing with someone else’s… who’s it from?”

“Just a prisoner,” her nose isn’t quite upturned but it is… as close as it can be without physically doing the motion.

“Uh… like a name?”

“Uh—” the woman turns to look at someone else, “who is this from?”

“Luke, I think.”

Tubbo just hums, looking a little bit closer. There’s clear differences between the two sequences, Tubbo tilts his head at it, “who’s the other sequence from?”

“Someone in America. Dunno who.”

And that makes Tubbo pause, he tries not to pull a face but it gives more questions than it leaves. Because… *huh.* Not knowing who the sequence is from makes it very hard to know *what* you’re looking for.

Unless it’s been long they just know it’s someone vaguely with traits similar to the first person. Tubbo scowls at the two sequences.

“What’s he even doing here?” someone across the room says.

“Kingston seems to think he’s some kind of fucking genius. Like he’s gonna solve this.”

Yeah… as if Tubbo is going to solve this.

He’s *not* going to get obsessed with whatever problem they’re having and solve it because the only way he gets dopamine is if he solves problems. He stares at the computers for a few more seconds before realising everyone has eyes on him.

Tubbo makes a small noise and runs his hand down his face, “what?”

“Why does Kingston think you’re going to do better than any trained professional?” someone deadpans, “what do you know.”

“Uh— don’t know about biomedical engineering, that's for sure. I’m more of a computer guy than a biology guy.”

Why is he telling them this?

Why is he the worst person in the world when it comes to keeping anything close to his chest ever? He could've just said he didn't know and leave it at that. Instead he's giving the entire fucking run down.

Why?

What is the purpose in him being like this?

"… does she know that?"

"I don't fucking think so!" Tubbo throws both of his hands in the air, "pretty sure she thinks I'm some sort of fucking super genius at everything rather than just knowing things in a couple of areas."

And… Tubbo doesn't know if he's a genius by the definition of it, or if he just knows how a lot of technology works and did some fairly advanced biology classes in high school. Wow. He misses high school.

The food in Pandora's is better, at least.

A group of the scientists look at each other.

Tubbo isn't going to call the expressions on their face sympathy, but it's close enough that like that Tubbo knows he's wriggled out of doing real work here. If he plays into being pathetic and useless and confused he might just have to be a glorified intern.

And *that,* that means Tubbo can spend his time looking around.

"Uh…" one of them say, scratching the back of their neck, "maybe you could just help us out around the office? Grab coffees or whatever— we won't tell Kingston."

Ah, unity within classes.

The work is incredibly slow, it is mostly just Tubbo looking around for things that people don't want to get themselves. Tubbo spends all of his free time trying to figure out what they're comparing. On the first day they bring in a man named Luke with blond hair and tired eyes. They inject him with *something* , then they wait three hours and then take more blood.

Tubbo doesn't fucking know what it all means and that frustrates him to no fucking end.

Over the next few days Tubbo watches various prisoners get taken in and the same thing happens. They take blood. They inject the person with *something* . They wait for more time. They take more blood.

Ten or so people go through this process and Tubbo can't *fucking figure it out.* What are they looking for? His lack of knowledge on biochemistry is quite clear because for all the looking over people's shoulders he's done he… doesn't fucking know.

They have genome sequencing. Tubbo doesn't know how to read genome sequencing let alone compare it to other genome sequencing.

Tubbo doesn't know how many days it's been— but the twelfth person dragged in is Pac.

He feels his entire heart drop as Pac stares up at him with wide confused eyes. He gives Tubbo a look and the kindest smile he can, despite him being the one dragged into the tiny room by a bunch of guards.

The room is pretty small, there are three rooms that have plexiglass on one side so the scientists can observe. Each room has a terrifying looking chair, a couple of medical supplies and two doors. One in the back where guards bring people through, and a door made of plexiglass that the scientists can enter.

It seems designed to make these scientists see these people as— nothing more than another experiment.

Tubbo hates it.

And Tubbo actually finds him focusing on the actual process of the entire thing now because that's Pac in there— that's who Tubbo returns to his shitty ass cell to every night. That's who he talks to about his life and Pac talks about his life and—

Tubbo watches as Pac's arms are strapped into the chair. His forearm facing the ceiling. There's something slightly relaxed in Pac's posture, like someone who used to fight and then gave up on it. Pac looks genuinely comfortable.

He hates that.

He hates that Pac looks natural like this— Pac who is funny and bright and smart just accepting this.

Tubbo grits his teeth and forces himself to look, he can't look away like he has been doing. Not when it's Pac.

A scientist approaches Pac the way someone might a rabid animal. She slowly puts the needle in Pac's arm to withdraw blood.

Pac just keeps calm eye contact with her.

That's somehow more terrifying actually.

A few moments pass, and the scientist looks content with her work, she exits the room before being handed another needle by someone else and entering again.

Pac's eyes don't leave her.

"Oi, Tubbo," someone says next to him, and Tubbo whips around to look at them. It's one of the scientists— of course it is, they're the only people who really talk to Tubbo these days, "can you grab his file?"

One part of Tubbo's brain wants to ask— *is that allowed?* He is a prisoner here, and there is no reason he should be trusted by these people. He still wears a prison jumpsuit for fuck's

sake, he just also sometimes wears a lab coat over it if he's being made to handle important things.

Today it's just the jumpsuit.

The other part of his brain screams at him— *YOU'RE BEING ALLOWED INTO THE FILING ROOM. USE THIS YOU DUMB FUCKING BITCH.*

That part of his brain wins out.

Tubbo nods, eyes darting back to Pac.

Pac's eyes are still boring into the scientist, he doesn't even look down as the needle is stabbed into his arm. Just looking at the scientist with a slightly empty gaze.

He tears his eyes away from Pac and turns, heading towards the file room.

The file room is something that they have been very secretive about until now, Tubbo hasn't been allowed to walk too close to it without people's eyes darting to him. Which makes sense all things considered—

Now they've just let him in.

It almost feels too easy… it *might* be too easy, this might be some kind of test.

Tubbo spies a camera pointing at the door.

It's a DVR camera— meaning if Tubbo can find a way to disconnect the camera from the harddrive there wouldn't be a camera watching this door. A lot of the other cameras around here are DVR cameras.

Which for such a high tech prison was a huge oversight— all it really takes is for someone to *know* they're DVR cameras and then it's all a bit fucked.

There's no scanning of any cards to get in— which makes sense Tubbo supposes because the laboratory needs a card to scan in. If Tubbo can get an identification card off one of the scientists here that could be useful.

It would also be gigantically risky.

There's ways to get around it that involve electricity mostly, maybe getting into the hardware of it. Mostly options not available to Tubbo.

He could try to break the card scanner so he's allowed to go in and fix it.

Shaking his head, Tubbo pushes the door open with his shoulder.

The room itself isn't… really anything special, with the same gross brown tile floor the rest of the lab has and the concrete walls that don't look quite finished. The room is a relatively long thin one.

Filing cabinets line the wall, they're slightly taller than Tubbo meaning he's going to have to drag out a step stool if he wants to see everything. Every file has a letter, 'M', 'S', and 'B' all have more than one cabinet.

Which… well makes sense if this is sorted by last name.

Tubbo does not know Pac's last name.

This may be a fucking problem.

Tubbo starts with 'M' mostly because it's one of the most common letters for a last name to start with. He flicks through that, seeing no names he recognises, he hopes he wouldn't see any name he recognised but…

He moves onto 'S', which is also one of the most common starting letters of last names.

After a good few moments of searching, *Pac Severino* stares back at him.

Tubbo leans his back against the filing cabinet, closing it with a slam as he starts sliding down the filing cabinet. He lays his legs out in front of him, sprawling slightly as he looks at the file in his hand.

It's not particularly heavy compared to any that Tubbo has been flicking through.

Pac Severino

Convicted of terrorism, vigilantism, murder, breaking and entering and conspiracy to overthrow the government

Tubbo stares at the words for a few seconds.

VIGILANTISM?

He stares at the words for a few more seconds before closing the file. He looks at the door. He looks back down at the file.

A lot of it is nothing, just talking about general behaviour (good) and about Pac's powers (which are also good), the file goes back about nine— nearly ten, years. A lot of it is nothing, until Tubbo (assumes) this set of experiments started about three years ago.

Then there are pages and pages of genome sequences and notes written in a chicken scratch not even Tubbo can read.

Still, he flicks through all the pages of bullshit he doesn't understand.

Tubbo reads like he can just understand science concepts through absorption. A technique that never worked in school and will not work here, he opens and closes his mouth a few times as if the thoughts are going to get in.

He just… doesn't understand *what* they're looking for.

It's showing the same strand over and over again— there's only a slight difference in one of the letters from the first to the last sequence that's been stuck in the file.

With a frustrated sigh Tubbo throws the file onto the floor.

Papers scatter out slightly, and it makes a noise as Tubbo grits his teeth and runs both of his hands through his hair, sticking it up in all kinds of directions.

His best shot at understanding *any* of this is this file, he knows how Pac works he knows what Pac looks like and how he talks and how his powers work and—

Powers.

Tubbo crawls over to the file that he has rather rudely thrown across the floor, he sorts through the files to find the ones he wants.

Cyclooxygenase-2 → (limiting) prostaglandins

G C A A C G T T A G A

Tubbo stares down at the paper for a few seconds. They've identified where Pac's powers come from and what they affect biologically in someone, and then they've attached a genome sequence to it?

Holy fuck.

They've attached a genome sequence to it.

For a second Tubbo's brain can't do anything apart from going *'holy fuck, holy fuck, holy shit, holy fucking shit.'* Then his brain reboots and he finds himself basically dragging himself across the floor to get back to the filing cabinet.

One bonus of a physical filing cabinet is that it means people outside can't hack into anything and… take these. A downside is anyone in the building can access them, and by some fluke of fucking Ender and Prime themselves Tubbo has access to the laboratories.

His eyes scan up immediately for any cameras, looking for any red flashing or anything. Having cameras in here very much could be a security risk, it means security guards could potentially see flashes of the files.

The only camera watching over this place is the one outside the door.

Tubbo, still sitting on the floor, his back pressed against the filing cabinets, kicks his feet with glee. Their own paranoia has fucked them, Tubbo has access to all of their files— he's fucking got in here. He wants to laugh and squeal and cry.

He hunches back over the file, while Pac's doesn't give much proof of any cruelty in particular he knows there will be files in here of people who have died. He's been given the key to taking this whole thing down.

Illegal experiments, non consensual government sanctioned experiments.

Tubbo hugs the file to his chest, he throws his head back and tries not to laugh.

“Where are the files, kid?” someone yells through the door and Tubbo jumps.

“Uh! Just looking!” Tubbo yells back, turning back around to the filing cabinet and pretending to look through it *just in case,* “sorry the filing is a bit different to what I’m used to, I’m learning it though!”

Something is said from the other side but Tubbo doesn’t care.

They’ve fucked themselves the second they sent Tubbo in here.

Tubbo gives himself one moment to stomp his feet and scream silently into his hands. Then he takes a deep breath, slides the important page of Pac’s file into the filing cabinet for Tubbo to retrieve later.

(And this way he has plausible deniability, the paper just fell out! Who put it in last?)

He tucks the file under his arm and heads back out to the main laboratory.

Back when Techno was fourteen and Phil decided that he could mentor the scrappy ring fighter turned vigilante turned attempted assassin turned hero, he knew that he was setting himself up for a life of struggle.

Years later sitting by the bedside of Tommy, Phil can’t do much else than weigh his options.

Tommy is snoring peacefully, the usual frown between his eyes is gone, which means Phil can stop worrying about that (he can’t) and start worrying about whatever situation Techno has put himself into.

Techno wouldn’t make up something this ridiculous, Phil *knows* that, he trusts Techno in a way he trusts few other people. Techno, despite what he seems to think, isn't violent without cause, he is, however, awful at trying to play the politics within the heroes.

He’s always been poor at that.

Phil has found himself respecting that at times, that Techno never had to fall into the politics of it all, that he never tried to please anyone. Techno has been able to carry himself with his sheer strength and the fear that comes from the thought of him switching sides.

Which is fine… it just means in moments like this Phil wants to rip his hair out.

Sam is Nelson-Jones favourite, there’s no conceivable reason that Phil is aware of that would make Sam *try* and kill a random worker. There’s also equally no reason that Fred would attempt it. There’s a picture to be made out here.

Phil has the distinct feeling he’s missing pieces of the puzzle.

There's a knock on the wall and the familiar face of Kristin pops into the room. Her smile is gentle if not a little bit restrained, and she's holding something underneath her arm. She's still in her work uniform, she has taken her name tag off though.

"Hey," she steps into the room and closes the door behind her with a click, "are you doing alright?"

"What's the situation at work?" Phil asks.

Kristin gives another strained smile, "I brought cookies, I can't bake for shit so I just got them from the cafe across the road."

"You're an angel," Phil is handed the cookies and immediately opens the small paper bag they've come in. They're Phil's favourite and for a moment everything can be okay in the world again for about thirty seconds.

"No camera footage from the stairwell," Kristin glances over at Tommy, her face twisting painfully, "I've scanned a bunch of the footage. The SBI floor footage seems to have been put on a loop. A couple of people heard fighting and yelling but no one really heard any details."

"So it would essentially be Techno's word against Sam's?"

Kristin nods, then she takes a few steps over to Phil and grabs one of the cookies out of the bag. She huffs as she eats it, staring at the wall, "Sam may have looped the footage if he planned to ambush Tommy on your floor. We found some footage of Daniel, Tommy and Sam in an elevator before the incident and Daniel dragged him out of there."

"Fuck," Phil runs both his hands through his hair, he has the very real urge to start trying to rip his hair out. He opens and closes his mouth a few times before sighing. He rubs his hand against his forehead like that's going to fix any of this.

"Can you find where it was looped from?"

"Have my best guys on it right now," Kristin pulls the other seat up next to Phil, "if they can you'll be the second person to know. I need you to know I can only put so many resources towards this— Nelson-Jones is probably going to want to sweep this under the rug."

"I know, I know," Phil takes a deep breath and stares up at the ceiling, "you're head of security surely you can do— something?"

Kristin shakes her head, "I'm trying everything I can."

"Thank you," is what Phil ends up whispering.

Kristin gives him a small smile, "this'll be fine, Phil."

Phil nods because he feels like throwing up.

There's something about Nelson-Jones that makes him feel like that lonely orphaned kid again, there's something about the thought of him that makes Phil want to curl into a ball and protect his face and wings. And he *knows* it's dumb, Phil is an adult and Nelson-Jones hasn't done anything to him in years.

He's just afraid.

He's afraid of what Nelson-Jones could do to his kid, he's afraid of what that would do to him.

And he's terrified he can't keep Techno safe.

Instead of saying any of that to Kristin, he starts chewing on the knuckle of his finger.

There's a long moment of silence between all the two of them, as both of them look at Tommy. He should be fine— that's what all of the doctors have been saying.

"He's going to get away with it," Phil whispers.

Kristin's head whips towards him, "don't say that."

"He's going to," Phil screws his eyes closed, "I've seen people he likes get away with worse than this. Sam would've gotten away with it even if there was a body involved. He's going to get away with it."

Kristin grabs Phil's arm, forcing Phil to look at her, "Phil. Sam isn't getting away with this while I'm head of security."

Phil tears his arm away from Kristin, "then you won't be head of security much longer."

Kristin's face twists into anger, her eyes narrow and her mouth immediately opens.

"You don't get it," Phil can't keep the contempt out of his tone no matter how badly he wants to, "he makes people go missing. Routinely. No one—" Phil takes a deep breath through his nose, "it has been ten years since he's *wanted* anything. The last time he wanted something so — so many people died."

She's still scowling at him, and Phil doesn't know how to make her *understand* that the last people who tried standing against Nelson-Jones are gone in everyway that matters— he doesn't know how to explain just the depths of how Nelson-Jones has his hands seeping into almost everything in L'Manberg.

He doesn't know how to warn Kristin.

"I think he really might want Tommy dead," Phil whispers, "I can not— fathom why, maybe it's revenge for Techno's insubordination for years. We have to *hope* he doesn't want Tommy dead because if he does I don't know if we can stop him."

"He's not that powerful," Kristin snaps back, "he's just one person."

And Phil wants to scream because yes he's one person! Phil's watched people die on Nelson-Jones's orders, he's killed people on his orders before and he'll probably do it again. Kristin doesn't know about the hitmen that Nelson-Jones has on his payroll because no one knows about any of this and what can Phil do about it?

Phil's always been helpless— *everyone* is helpless when it comes to this and—

If Techno is right, which Phil knows deep down he is. It means that Tommy won't be safe here, it probably means that Tommy can't be safe anywhere and Phil doesn't know how to stop any of this.

"Just— be careful. He's really good at what he does… he's always been good at what he does."

Kristin gives him a small smile, some of her hair flops down into her face which she blows away, "the concern is sweet Phil, I'm good at what I do."

And Phil *knows* that, of course he knows that. He's seen the war paths Kristin goes on when she gets determined and— with a sigh Phil runs a hand down his forehead and just lets himself look at Kristin for a few moments.

She also looks tired, bags under her eyes and a crease in her brow that Phil feels copied on his own face. She reaches for another cookie, eyes still looking at Tommy. Tommy who is breathing steadily and okay.

"Y'know," Kristin says, taking a bite out of the cookie, "none of this makes any sense. It's just such a weird series of actions— what motivation is there between any of the involved parties—"

"Ah, that's what I'm curious about too, Ms Mors."

Phil knows that voice, the low rumble of it and the posh accent that Phil himself learnt how to copy when it was needed. He knows that voice because it followed him around his entire childhood— and is now following him around his entire adulthood.

His head snaps towards the doorway.

William Nelson-Jones is someone who Phil couldn't avoid recognising if he tried. He looks different than he did from when Phil was growing up— of course. His hair has thinned out at the top and is grey, with splotches of white and brown like his hair is trying to hold onto a life it doesn't have. He's always been a gangly man, with thin limbs and a certain hollowness in his face that he's always had. Now he's clean shaven unlike how he had been when Phil was growing up, his skin has gotten even paler to the point he's sneaking closer and closer to looking more like a corpse than a human.

Still, Phil remembers those pale, thin hands ripping stuffed animals Phil got too attached to. He remembers the words spouted from a gaunt face and the hours of having his wings bound behind his back.

Now Phil can tuck his wings into his clothes.

That's never been normal for an avian hybrid that has wings.

However, as William walks forwards Phil can finally take notice of the things that have changed since last time. There are noticeable bags under his eyes, there is something heavy in every step and Phil gets a small victory from the exhaustion that seems to hang off of William's frame.

Phil senses as his body locks up, the way his wings tucked underneath his relatively loose shirt seem to bristle. His heart starts beating in his throat and it takes all of his effort to stay relatively level-headed.

"William," Kristin says with a smile, "it's been a long time since we've talked."

"It truly has been too long, Ms Mors," William says with a smile.

Phil needs to rip his own skin off, his eyes immediately dart to Tommy and like that Phil knows he will die before leaving this room while William is here.

He shoots a quick glance at Kristin who looks nothing but pleasant.

Everything inside of Phil's chest hurts, his eyes darting from Tommy to William.

William moves so he's standing at the end of Tommy's bed, and every bone locks up in Phil's body as he watches for any slightest movement. Kristin shifts in her chair, crossing and uncrossing her legs, before deciding to cross them.

"Poor thing," William nearly coos, "blue is a particularly brutal overdose, I hear."

"Yeah," Kristin stands, brushing her hands on her pants and standing at the end of the bed next to William, "he was lucky Techno found him before any real damage could be done."

"Hm. Do we know how that happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"It was just a particularly fast response time," William says with a smile, "I'm curious as to how— was it just something that Techno assumed, did he know something was wrong? I would love to talk to Techno soon, we will need to get his side of the story soon. It's quite unusual though."

"It's one of the odder cases I've been put in charge of," Kristin laughs but there's something off about it. Something Phil might be able to think about more if his heart wasn't trying to explode out of his throat.

He's an adult.

William isn't going to do anything anymore— he hasn't *done* anything in years.

“When you next see Techno tell him we have to talk. I sense we have a lot to discuss.”

Phil can’t— even think of words to say, it’s like he’s watching his worst nightmare play out in front of him. Everything he spent years trying to avoid is happening, William is talking to him, he wants to talk to Techno— alone, about something Techno certainly did.

This is bad. This is really bad.

For the first time since he’s entered the room, William’s eyes actually flick to Tommy, observing his face, “it’s quite impressive I haven’t met Tommy until now. Keeping my favourite heroes out of trouble with the public, he has truly made my job much easier. I should have given my personal thanks for that months ago.”

William then picks up the clipboard hung on the end of Tommy’s bed, humming as his eyes scan over it. “Thomas Underscore…” his eyes dart up again, landing on Tommy yet again, “is that his real name?”

“Pardon?”

“Sorry— of course it’s his real name, did he go by any names that you’re aware of beforehand?”

And Phil doesn’t really know *what* William is trying to ask, he’s confused as to the angle that he’s trying to take. He does know that any information they give away now could end badly, Phil knows how William uses information.

Phil will be dead and in the fucking ground before he abets that.

“Not that we’re aware of,” Phil says, “why?”

William hums, hanging the clipboard up on the end of the bed where it had been resting, “he just looks quite like someone I used to know.”

“Who?” Phil asks.

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business,” William snaps, “do I have to tell you everyone I have ever met now?”

“No. Sorry.”

It’s not even the all encompassing panic Phil would get when he was younger, it’s a duller panic. One that claws at his throat and brain, one that Phil thought he could grow out of but it seems every time a harsh voice is turned back to him that dull, everlasting panic is back, clawing onto his brain.

William doesn’t give Phil more of a second glance as he turns to look back at Tommy. His eyes scan over Tommy’s face again, eyes narrowing slightly, “I’m afraid I am quite preoccupied for the next few hours, I have a meeting in uh— five minutes it appears.”

With a huff William looks at his watch.

“If he wakes up before I am able to get back here send Tommy my regards. Any time he needs off is more than acceptable,” he gives Tommy one last look, his eyes flickering to Phil and then he gives Kristin an actual smile.

With shuffling footsteps William leaves.

The door is still open, and this private room isn’t as private as anyone would like it to be. Still, both Kristin and Phil wait for the shuffling footsteps to fade away before Phil tries to open his mouth.

Instead the words get clogged in his throat and he looks at his folded hands.

His hands are still shaking.

Kristin’s eyes glance from Phil’s shaking hands to the information clipboard hanging on the end of Tommy’s bed. She turns around to look better at Phil.

“I don’t like that,” Phil whispers.

“Me neither,” Kristin grimaces.

There’s something stiff in Sniff’s shoulders after seeing Tommy being carried lifelessly down the stairs by Techno. Her eyes don’t dart anywhere but the floor as they follow wherever Aimsey goes.

It’s like having a ghost trailing behind you.

Sniff stays completely silent as Aimsey explains the story to some HR person for the fifth time— that they don’t have the full context but what they saw was implicating at best, criminal at worst.

Throughout all of it Sniff stays quiet, a blank expression on their face as they rock from side to side whenever they’re standing still. Aimsey keeps an arm on Sniff’s whenever they can, they can’t drag them somewhere and talk with all the questions being directed at them, but at least a slither of a grounding presence is something that he can be.

“Yes,” Aimsey says for the billionth time, “a needle was recovered from the scene— that’s been taken to investigations for a proper examination.”

They get asked the same questions a few more times before out of nothing but sheer frustration Aimsey throws their arms up in the air, opens their mouth to yell at someone and it’s Sniff who catches Aimsey’s arms.

Aimsey’s eyes meet Sniff’s dark blue ones, and Sniff just shakes their head.

“Perhaps it’s best if we stop questioning these two,” someone says, “they have repeated their testimonies several times. Perhaps you two would be better off going to check on Sam Warren?”

Sniff's entire face melts into disgust at the suggestion, but Aimsey just nods, hands gripping onto Sniff's. Sniff grimaces but otherwise doesn't argue.

The two of them head from the floor they've taken refuge on and head towards the elevator. Sniff shuffles next to Aimsey, barely lifting their feet from the ground. After they get far enough away from the HR people, Aimsey stops in their tracks.

Sniff glances at him, a question on their face.

"Are you okay?" Aimsey whispers.

Sniff just nods, "I'm fine."

"You're— all floaty."

Sniff nods again, "it's— unsettling to see someone who's been overdosed. It's always going to be unsettling to see someone who's been overdosed— it was just…" Sniff trails off, eyes finding the wall next to them.

Aimsey grabs Sniff's arms again, "are you here right now?"

"Kinda," Sniff says, "I'm half— half back in the rings. It feels like all I've ever been is halfway in the rings, like all of this is a dream and I'm going to wake up in that fucking bed I spent years in. And— it all feels floaty."

"Alright," Aimsey's grip on Sniff's arms tighten a little bit.

With not as much difficulty as Aimsey was honestly expecting she sits both of them on the ground. Sniff's back slides against the wall until they're on the floor, legs out in front of them and eyes only half focused on Aimsey.

"You're not there."

"I'll always be there," Sniff whispers, "how did— how did Techno cope with this? I'm always there— when good things happen to me I'm still there, fighting for my life. When bad things happen I'm there, fighting for my life. No matter what happens I'm there, I'm fighting and there's blood and cracked bone and—"

Aimsey's grip around Sniff's arms tighten, "you're not there, Sniff. You're out."

"For six months," Sniff laughs, "not even a year— I'm still… I'll never be out of there."

Sniff's eyes are the most unnerving thing about this entire thing, glassy and dark blue and still *here* but also floating somewhere else. Like one half of their brain is focusing on now, on Aimsey sitting in front of them, and the other half is floating in the hellish situation Sniff had to live in for years.

"You are," Aimsey says, "the people involved have been arrested or killed. They're not going to do it to anyone else, not while Elysium are involved."

Sniff laughs, “Elysium allowed it— did you know that? Most people don’t know that— I joined Elysium for a bit, found out they got money from the rings. Left for the heroes, decided I was going to take them down— now I’m always there. I’m always in the rings, every fight is like it’s my last one and—”

All Aimsey can bring themselves to do is just hold Sniff’s arms, enough to try and be grounding but not enough to hurt.

“I don’t know how I can keep living like this,” Sniff says. “Everything I do, it’s always back there— everytime I try to forget or move on it hurts. It always hurts.”

Aimsey doesn’t know how to deal with a— trauma this severe. Aimsey who grew up the child of a lawyer in a well-off district doesn’t know how to comprehend the amount of hurt Sniff is going through on a daily basis. He can’t quantify that sort of pain with any of their own— it’s an impossible amount of pain and trauma to just always be seeing and living through.

Six months also isn’t that long— not for anything but especially not for this.

And Aimsey doesn’t know what to do— they don’t know what they’d want someone to do for them in this situation apart from be there for her.

So maybe that’s what Aimsey tries first.

So Aimsey sits himself on the floor, legs crossed underneath them and looks across from Sniff, “is there someone you can talk to about this.”

“Techno. He— I hope he gets it, I need someone to get it, it feels like I’m going insane,” their hands creep up to their hair and they bury their hands in it. Not pulling, more just running their fingers across their scalp for relief, “everything— everything is so tied up in it. Everything I do— and then I saw Tommy and—”

Sniff takes a shuddering breath.

“I saw my friends look like that before they died—”

Aimsey feels like their heart is breaking inside of their chest a little.

“Does it feel like it did when you first left?” Aimsey asks.

“What?”

“Right now… has it changed since you first left? Do you feel— better at all?”

Something about the question pulls something in Sniff’s head, her eyes snap to Aimsey’s and blink a few times, “uh— yeah— I think so. I can do things without thinking about it… not for long, but I can.”

Aimsey hums, “well— even in six months it’s gotten better, right? Who knows what it’ll be like in a year— six years, twenty years. Nothing can justify what happened, but I don’t think

the bad things that happen to someone define their life forever."

"What if I never feel okay again?" Sniff whispers, "I used to feel okay— when I was young. I went to high school even. That's pretty rare for the heroes— didn't finish, I think I was sold to the fighting rings by my family I don't know, I don't remember. I just… I just want to feel *okay,* I don't have to go back to normal but I just want to feel okay."

"I just want to sleep in a bed without comparing it to my old one. I want to eat food without comparing it. I just wanna— exist and be gentle."

"Can I hug you?" Aimsey whispers.

Sniff nods, eyes suddenly getting teary.

Aimsey wraps Sniff up in their arms because what else is there to do? Nothing is ever going to make this *okay* not right now, and maybe not in the future. Something can make *Sniff* feel okay again, but nothing ever will make this okay.

So Aimsey hugs Sniff as tight as they can, because they don't know the last time Sniff was hugged and Sniff needs it.

They can't make this okay— but maybe for a second they can make everything a little bit easier, a little bit less to bear alone. Sniff buries their face into Aimsey's shoulder. In return Aimsey ignores the shuddering breaths Sniff is letting out.

Aimsey has already resolved to not let go until Sniff decides to let go.

"I think you should talk to Techno about this," Aimsey whispers, "I think you should talk to a therapist too— but that's a lot scarier. Or to me— or to anyone, I can't promise I can get it but I'm a really good listener."

Sniff laughs, because of course they do. She wipes her eyes as she leans away from Aimsey, and Aimsey's arms drop by his side.

Sniff opens and closes their mouth before running both of their hands down their face. They rub at their temples and then at their eyes again. Sniff looks up at Aimsey again, and their eyes aren't so hazy— they don't look like they're being pulled in two different directions.

Aimsey gives them a small smile, "you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. Well— better."

"That's what I like to hear—"

"Oi!" someone yells at them, and Aimsey whips around, hair flying around as they do so, "aren't you two supposed to be checking on Sam Warren?"

"Go fuck yourself," Aimsey yells back, "aren't you supposed to get the fucking stick out of your ass— if not I can shove it so far up there that it comes out of your mouth or pierces the cavern in your head some would call a brain—"

“You spend too much time with people from Logstedchire,” Sniff mutters, before they also turn to look at whoever just yelled, “we’ll be down there in a second, sorry. I was just dealing with the trauma of being in a fighting ring for five years.”

“Oh.”

“But we wouldn’t want to inconvenience you *or* the attempted murderer,” Sniff says, standing up and brushing their hands on their pants, “so we will be *right* down.”

The worker looks slightly stunned at the entire thing, but Sniff hauls Aimsey onto their feet and heads towards the elevator.

In the quiet hum of the elevator, Sniff turns their head a little. Less to look at Aimsey and more to indicate that they have a thought to share with Aimsey, “you’re good at this you know.”

“Huh?”

“Leading. Giving motivation. Being a good friend. You’re just—” Sniff fumbles on a word for a while, stuttering out half words before just shrugging, “you’re just good I guess. In a way I wish I could be.”

“I’m not *that* good,” Aimsey laughs, “I just listen.”

“You have single handedly done more good for me in my life than any other person has,” Sniff very purposefully isn’t looking at Aimsey, “and we’ve only known each other for a few months— I’d name my firstborn after you if I wanted kids.”

“If you get a cat can you name it after me?”

That sends a small chuckle out of Sniff, “sure. Teese the cat.”

“A distinguished name for a distinguished cat, I see.”

“Please don’t— ever underthink how much you changed my life— or Ranboo’s or Guqqie’s.”

Tubbo is left out of that list on purpose.

Neither of them decide to talk about it more or speak on it more, Sniff’s face turns pained for a few seconds before they shake off the expression. There’s still remnants of sadness though, and Aimsey wishes they could rip that sadness out of both of their chests— but that sadness looks like it will remain as long as Tubbo isn’t around.

“I’d follow you to the end, *Commander.* ”

Aimsey rolls their eyes as the elevator doors swing open, “don’t call me that.”

Sniff grins as they walk down the hall of this medical floor, looking for whatever private room they’ve shoved Sam in after stabilising him, “I reckon you’d be great at commanding a battle.”

He just decides to ignore this entirely.

At the end of the wing is one of the bigger private rooms, the thing that tips Aimsey off to *oh Sam might be there,* is the fact William Nelson-Jones is coming out of the room.

Nelson-Jones looks as gaunt as ever, his hands shake slightly as he grips the door knob. For a second he looks like what he really is— an old man who doesn't look well. However, his eyes dart upwards landing on Sniff and Aimsey walking towards him.

"Ah… Osteon… Zephyrus, everyone's favourite hero trainees," Nelson-Jones says with a smile that says anything but, "what can I do for you two today?"

"We were sent down to make sure uh— he was okay," Aimsey says as Sniff slides past the two of them into the hospital room.

They close the door behind them with a gentle click.

"Ah…" Nelson-Jones nods as if he knows more, "yes— I sense there are several people who want Sam dead, especially after today. I'm not even sure if I can blame them, despite my fondness of him."

It almost sounds… like an actual confession of a hero's wrongdoing.

Which… in Aimsey's memory is basically unheard of.

"Huh?" Aimsey says, "what does that mean?"

"Depending on how my… chat with your mentor goes, we'll see how this works out. From where I'm standing currently, Sam is looking rather guilty of attempted murder. We will have to see how that shakes out."

Aimsey just stares at him— what the fuck is his angle?

"Go check on your fellow trainee," Nelson-Jones says, "I have meetings with several people including your mentor when he gets back— make sure Osteon doesn't do something they regret."

Aimsey's entire head screams at them for just a moment. Head reeling from the implication Sam *might* get tried, reeling from the mentions of a conversation with Techno, reeling from just— all of it if they're being completely honest.

Nelson-Jones does nothing but give them a short smile before heading off towards the end of the wing.

This room is isolated from the others, Aimsey notices right about now. Most of the hustle and bustle of this medical ward is closer to the elevators… it's private… which is a confusing thing to do for someone if Nelson-Jones believes Sam is going to be assassinated—

Oh.

It's a set up.

Everything gets easier for Nelson-Jones if Sam dies right now.

Oh shit.

Aimsey pushes the door to the private room.

Sniff is standing over Sam, an outstretched hand hovering over his face.

They're breathing heavily, hand shaking slightly over Sam's face. Their eyes are screwed closed and if Aimsey didn't know better he'd think Sniff was muttering to themself.

"What are you doing?"

Sniff whirls around, other hand flying out in front of her so both palms are facing towards Aimsey. Sniff is still breathing heavily, but their shoulders relax when they see it's just Aimsey. Both of their hands go down by their sides.

"Aims," Sniff whispers, "I—"

They both know.

For a second Aimsey can barely think— because Sniff was going to kill Sam. Sniff was going to kill Sam and the worst part is Aimsey doesn't even think he can blame Sniff for it.

"I just—" Sniff looks away from Aimsey, gaze settling back onto Sam. "We could kill him, no one would know. The world would be a better place for it. We were supposed to walk in and find him dead."

Aimsey turns to look at Sniff, mouth slightly open. Sniff is staring straight at Sam, something dark in their eyes that Aimsey hasn't seen before.

"I could just snap his neck," Sniff takes a step closer, "they wouldn't think it was me… we could be rid of him."

"So what?" Aimsey glances over her shoulder at the door, no one is here and Aimsey personally doubts that Sam has a tonne of people who care about him enough to even try. They're alone, there's no cameras in this room.

No one would know if they killed Sam here.

The world might even be better off for it.

"If you kill Sam there will be another," Aimsey doesn't move from their spot, but their eyes bore into Sniff, "there's always going to be another terrible, awful person until we change something about what allows these people to get into power."

"There won't be another one," Sniff says, "trying to kill a teenager? Tommy is only nineteen, why the *fuck* would someone want to do that— he's the nicest kid in the world."

“To get at Techno, to show Techno that Sam does have power over him.”

Sniff doesn’t say anything, they only stare at Sam.

There’s something cold in Sniff’s eyes, eyes that aren’t quite here, but eyes that are sharp and dangerous. For the first time Aimsey is shown the version of Sniff may have been in the fighting rings, the version of Sniff that hasn’t had enough time to mellow out let alone settle.

“Don’t we want to be better than Elysium?” Aimsey asks, “wasn’t that the whole goal of Anemoi? A solution without violence that doesn’t need us to give away our morals and become the things we don’t want to be.”

“I don’t know if there is a solution without violence anymore, Aims,” Sniff’s head snaps around to look at Aimsey, “how much longer does Logstedchire take the violence? Then when fighting the boot off of our fucking throat we get told to make sure not to hurt the person with the boot on our throat.”

“I see why you tried to join Elysium with that logic,” Aimsey crosses his arms, unable to do anything else but stare at Sniff.

Xe won’t interrupt, if Sniff wants to kill Sam— then can Aimsey really bring it within themselves to fight Sniff on it? Who is she to deny that? Sam might need to die, Aimsey just… doesn’t know if that’s how they have to deal with this.

She hopes it isn’t.

Sniff takes a deep breath, eyes slowly roaming back over to Sam, “he tried to overdose a teenager on a dangerous drug that can turn you into a— it can fuck you up for the rest of your life. That’s not forgivable.”

“I never said it was.”

“I want him to die,” it’s more of a confession than anything else, with a tired, broken tone that came from a lifetime of fighting and violence and a lack of gentleness. Sniff sounds, so, so tired of all of this, “I watched— for my entire life people like him hurt kids like Tommy. Like me. Like my friends who are no longer fucking alive because the people in charge of the fighting rings didn’t care.”

Sniff takes a deep breath, and then another and then another until they’re breathing heavily. There is anger and hate and contempt in every twisting breath. Sniff’s shoulders rise and fall with each heaving breath.

“I watched three of my friends die from overdoses… one of them did it because they couldn’t survive the rings anymore. No one talks about the horror of seeing your friend’s head split in half, and now it’s being used as a *weapon* against a kid from Logstedchire? That’s so—”

Sniff turns to look over their shoulder, eyes landing on Aimsey.

“So, what do you say, Commander?”

“I— I’m not going to stop you, Sniff. I don’t— I haven’t seen a body before let alone given permission to turn someone into a body.”

“Yeah, you’re not from Logstedchire,” Sniff says with a small amount of amusement, “you don’t have to look, Aims… it’s not pretty work.”

Sniff slowly creeps towards Sam, until they’re hovering right by Sam’s bed, they look down at Sam for a few moments, almost like Sniff is trying to commit every detail to memory. And Aimsey knows that Sniff can just end this— snap something important— she was picked by the heroes for a reason.

With a sigh Sniff slowly raises one of their hands, fingers slowly furling into a fist.

There is a long moment of silence as Aimsey stares between the two of them.

“I don’t want you to have to become whoever you were in the fighting rings!” Aimsey cries out, holding both of his hands out in front of him like he can do anything about it, “I don’t— I don’t want that for you, not if you don’t have to. If you— if you *really* want him dead, down in your heart I’m not going to stop you. I just— need you to know that you don’t have to slip into the mask of whoever you had to be to survive.”

Sniff’s eyes snap up to Aimsey’s.

“He’s not worth… spoiling whatever chance at a normal life you get now. You said you wanted to be gentle and I want that for you too— maybe that’s selfish of me to say—”

And it is, isn’t it? That Aimsey doesn’t want Sniff to get their hands bloody no matter how awful Sam is, the greater good might mean he needs to die— Aimsey doesn’t know. But Sniff is her friend, and Sniff is finally breaking out of whatever thinking she needed to live in the fighting rings and Aimsey…

Can’t not at least *try* and warn them.

And maybe Sniff really wants this— and Aimsey will stand by them because that’s what Aimsey is really good at.

Sniff takes a deep breath, looking at Sam, “he’s a monster.”

“If you do this, I don’t want you to feel like a monster,” Aimsey whispers.

Sniff takes a deep breath, she brushes some of her hair off her forehead. They look at Sam for a few long moments, crouching down so she’s eye level with Sam laying down in the bed. One side of his face is a giant bruise, his lip is busted open, there’s a cut on his eyebrow and that’s before the giant bandage on the back of Sam’s head.

“If Sam dies Techno will get blamed for it,” Aimsey says, “I just need you to— know. I don’t want you to regret it.”

Sniff stares down at Sam, “I want him dead.”

“That’s not the same thing as wanting to kill him.”

“I know. Trust me—” Sniff’s voice breaks a little on the edges, “I know.”

Aimsey just watches, because what else is there to do? This is Sniff’s choice and Aimsey will not slight them for it either way. There will never be anything to forgive here, not when it comes to Sniff.

“Is it selfish?” Sniff asks, “to keep this bastard alive.”

They don’t know— neither of them know.

“Maybe.”

“Can— can we afford to be selfish?”

And Aimsey doesn’t know, *fuck* they wish they knew. Sam could very easily turn on someone else, Sam could very easily hurt Tommy again. Sam could *kill* Tommy and then what— are Aimsey and Sniff complicit because they make sure Sam died so no one could ever be hurt again?

He doesn’t know.

“We lost Tubbo,” Aimsey whispers, “I— I don’t want to lose you to yourself, you’re one of my closest friends, Sniff. I— maybe it makes me a bad person because it’s— maybe you or someone else and I choose you.”

“That’s not very heroic of you,” Sniff tries to laugh but it sounds more like a sob.

“Neither is killing a man while he’s unconscious from nearly getting beaten to death.”

That makes Sniff laugh, it still sounds more like a sob but Aimsey is going to take the wins where they’re given to her. It feels like they haven’t been given many wins lately— with Tubbo gone and Ranboo a shell of themselves because of it.

Maybe this can count as a win too—

Maybe it’s not a loss that they don’t want to do this, maybe it’s not a loss that they’re not going to be the ones to do it. Do they really deserve to betray themselves for a man as awful as Sam? Why did it ever have to be them?

“I wish I was strong enough,” Sniff turns to look at Aimsey, “to do what we probably should.”

Aimsey smiles and it hurts, “we can be weak together.”

“Yeah…” Sniff laughs, “weak together.”

It doesn’t seem so bad— to be weak with someone.

The next time Tommy wakes up it's a lot gentler, it's more the feeling of being woken up by the rising sun in your eyes than waking up to a light being flicked on. When he opens his eyes he's still in a hospital room he doesn't recognise.

It's not quiet, and Tommy still hates hospitals and how helpless they make him feel.

He turns his head to the side.

Sitting, slumped in the chair with hair falling over his face is Techno. His head is bowed down and he's breathing heavily like he's sleeping.

"Tech?"

Techno looks up at Tommy.

The amount of relief that floods across Techno's face is something Tommy has never seen on another person before. The way that tears immediately spring into Techno's eyes, and he's virtually launching himself forwards, kneeling on Tommy's bed as he wraps his arms around Tommy's shoulders.

There's a moment of relative quiet as Techno hugs him as tightly.

Tommy can feel his body relax into it, it's slightly bonecrushing, but Tommy mostly likes his hugs that way anyway. He buries his face into Techno's shoulder and tries not to cry because all of it is too much and he's so tired and he's so glad Techno is here.

And then Techno is honest-to-God crying.

Tommy feels his entire body freeze up at the realisation. Techno… obviously isn't an emotionless being but he never *cries,* not like this and not to someone.

Techno lets go almost as quickly as the hug happened, wiping his eyes with his sleeve as he evidently looks away from Tommy.

"You know you're like… allowed to cry, right?" Tommy whispers.

Techno gives him a relatively short laugh, still wiping at his eyes, "I was worried about you kid. I *am* worried about you."

"I kinda have that effect on people— kinda always have, for reasons that I think have become a lot more obvious."

The joke lands more than flat, the joke falls over and cracks its head open on the cement and then the joke has to be dragged to an ambulance.

Techno's face only gets more serious, "what— how did this happen to you?"

And it's said with such a broken tone that Tommy is given no other option apart from staring at Techno and the earnestness on his face. Techno looks like he's about to cry again, and Tommy doesn't know what to *do with that.*

If there's ever been an adult in his life that has cared, it's always been Techno. And he *knows* the concern comes from a genuine place of care for Tommy and sometimes he hates that it does but— it's Techno…

"Um…" Tommy looks down at his hands.

He can't keep running.

He just can't.

Tommy has been running from so long he's never even thought about turning around to look at the problem face-on. And maybe he can keep running because it's all he knows but maybe it's time to try and stop running.

It's just Techno. Techno who has never done anything to hurt him, Techno who has never done— well, anything apart from being a steadying force in Tommy's life.

"Um…" Tommy takes a deep breath, "heroes make a lot of money. My family was poor, they wanted to not be poor. They figured an easy way was to make me a hero— I wasn't… born with powers though."

"So they gave you powers."

Tommy nods, his eyes start to sting and his throat grows tighter.

"Um I mean— I don't know all the details. Hybrid transformations work on pulling your nearest genetic hybrid connection… I guess that just happened a bunch of times."

"Do you know how many times?" Techno asks.

Tommy shakes his head, "I don't… I don't remember a lot apart from the fear. It's all kind of — melded into one. I think I'm Avian and Spider at some point— but I don't know about anything else. I guess Wither Skeleton? I can do the weird— brain stuff."

"The head healer at the tower knows," Techno says, "Mae is their name— they're the one who ran the test to make sure you weren't— transforming. They said that your body just seems to… consume the blue before it could do anything. Bad said it might reactivate your genes that heighten your power."

Tommy's chest squeezes. He knew Bad already knew, but some healer from the tower? Someone who could sell him over to Nelson-Jones?

"You told other people?"

"I trust them. I was afraid you were going to die— especially after the five hybrid types and — I went to Bad because—" Techno takes a deep breath, running a hand down his face, "I didn't know what else to do. Mae kept it from other people on purpose, I— I trust they're not going to fuck you over."

He nods, still looking down at his hands.

“Do you— remember anything else from when you were a kid. Do you even want to talk about it?”

And Techno pushes because *of course he does,* he’s always known when to push and when to leave it and… can Tommy really leave it anymore? This clawing ugly thing in his stomach that isn’t going to leave?

And Tommy feels an ugly bitter laugh rise in his throat, something twisting and clawing and he feels it in his chest, “No. Not talking about it for a decade got me fucking no where though.”

“You don’t have to tell me anything, Tommy,” Techno says, “the past can be the past.”

Tommy shakes his head, looking down at his hands again, “uh— I think they used it like a punishment. I don’t— remember a lot, I was really little and I think my brain tried to block it out the best it could. But uh—”

“I didn’t mean to! Mama I didn’t mean to, I’m sorry—”

He shudders the memory off, “I wasn’t… kidnapped. I wasn’t sold off to anyone. My parents just wanted— the perfect hero because we were starving. I don’t— I don’t actually know how poor we were at the time. We had somewhere to live, I don’t… remember a lot about it.”

The fridge had a drawing on it of the Sygrove family. Tommy didn’t have the right coloured pencils for it. So his mum and himself had orange hair and his dad had dark blue hair. The picture meant as a child Tommy could ignore the fridge getting emptier and emptier inside.

“Um… and so they’d stab me— or not always stab me I guess, you need both types of blue. When it hurt my mum used to put me on her lap and tell me stories, it was— it was one of the only times she touched me and it didn’t hurt.”

The stinging in his eyes is worse now, he knows tears are sliding out of the corner of his eyes and he knows he’s crying and he knows maybe he could try and hide it or stop crying but he doesn’t want to anymore.

“And sometimes I think I miss the hurt,” Tommy confesses, “I know that was so long ago but I knew that as affection because that’s what I got and I understood that and so many years of love hasn’t erased the fact I want to be hurt because I understand that.”

Tears are streaming down Tommy’s face now.

“And I miss my parents and I miss the pain that came with it and I wish— I wish I could shake the idea that being loved is being abused.”

It looks like Techno’s heart is shredding itself apart in his chest.

“The transformations hurt so badly,” Tommy whispers, “it feels like your entire body is ripping apart and rewriting itself. It feels like every nerve is trying to tear itself out of your body and— I think I liked it because even though it hurt so badly at least Mum would hold me. And I don’t— does that make me a bad person?”

Techno shakes his head, immediately drawing Tommy into a hug, “no, never, Tommy. It doesn’t make you a bad person. You’re not a bad person, not for this, not for anything. You’re not a bad person for wanting affection from your parents and you’re not a bad person because it only ever seemed to happen when you were hurting.”

Tommy wipes his face on Techno’s shirt, his nose is all snotty and gross.

Techno doesn’t even complain about the clear snot line on his shirt.

“And when— and when it happened to you,” Tommy whispers, “I— it must’ve hurt so badly and I could’ve done something and I didn’t do anything—”

Techno shakes his head, hugging Tommy tighter to him, “no, I don’t blame you, okay? I didn’t blame you before I knew this and I don’t blame you now. I’m okay, and you’re okay now, and we’re gonna be fine.”

“The Tower isn’t safe— if Sam was acting under orders, people know I’m Theseus and—”

“You can resign,” Techno says, “we’ll figure something out, alright? You’ll be okay— I promise you.”

And for a second Tommy gets to feel like a kid again, wrapped up in someone else’s arms and being told that everything will be okay. Maybe it will be okay— maybe he can be a kid for a little bit longer and hold onto that.

Techno doesn’t break promises to him.

It’s childish and stupid to hold onto a promise like this, but Tommy doesn’t have much else to hold onto right now. Maybe for once someone else can help keep him safe— from Sam and from the heroes and from William Nelson-Jones and just… from all of it.

The door swings open, and Techno’s arms drop from where they’re hugging Tommy like that’s the only thing stopping him from slipping away.

Tommy glances over his shoulder towards the doorway.

It’s Foolish. He looks bad.

His hair is drenched and mostly stuck to his face, the large section of golden skin that surrounds his left eye and travels down the left side of his face is covered in water droplets. The large golden chestplate he wears is smeared with a deep red and water rolling down it. Some of the white fabric on his pant leg is also covered in blood.

Foolish looks at Techno, he looks at Tommy and then he wheezes. Doubling over and putting both of his hands on his knees as he tries to breathe.

“I—” Foolish wheezes and it sounds painful, “it’s Daniel.”

And ice floods his veins as raw panic takes over his body. Tommy’s stomach drops and his entire world seems to be shattering in half at his feet right now. The tower isn’t safe anymore,

he’s not sure if home is safe and Purpled apparently isn’t fucking safe.

“Please— please tell me that’s not his blood,” Tommy whispers, “please don’t—”

Foolish’s silence is more than enough of an answer.

And Tommy’s world fractures.

Chapter End Notes

hey babes please be nice to my science skills i’m an english/photography student

I would also like to thank The Priory of the Orange Tree by Samantha Shannon for making me realise. I can actually skim over things and time while giving good enough context (WHICH BTW YOU SHOULD ALL READ IT HAS DRAGONS AND ALSO LESBIANS)

burn

Chapter Summary

He drops the photos onto the floor.

He has a mask to find.

or, honestly given the circumstances i think tommy acts quite normal about the events that have transpired over the past 3 hours of his life

Chapter Notes

HI. I normally prewrite author's notes and edit them but I didn't this time. So this is ellis 12 hours before the update on the mic. Just based on what I know about mentally ill teenagers (and formerly mentally ill teenagers who are now adults and still mentally ill but also a bit more tired about the whole thing such as myself), this is going to become a fan favourite.

My darling, amazing, spectacular, talented, brilliant beta reader (Roz!) said that this chapter was, AND I QUOTE "Holy fuck that was such a good chapter". Sooo enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What?” Techno says, he swings his legs off the bed, walking up to Foolish, “what do you mean Daniel—”

“He—” Foolish wheezes, “we uh… can’t find him… he might’ve um—”

When Tommy was younger he got so angry that his powers nearly killed him. It’s something that he doesn’t particularly like to think about— it was after Deo left him and Tommy was so angry and hurt that things around him started crumbling.

It was an easy thing to be hurt about, and sometimes when Tommy thinks about it too hard now it feels like his heart is trying to rip itself out of his chest. It’s something he’s managed to put a lid on pretty well— he’s less hurt by Deo’s betrayal now, it aches more like a bruise when you press on it than the gaping hole it used to be.

The last time this sort of rage happened Tommy was nearly unconscious with anger, he knew at the time he broke things with his powers by accident. He still doesn’t really know how or what, or if Tommy fixed it or where it was.

That time pales in comparison to this.

This time is perfectly calm, Tommy is suddenly made aware of everything his body is capable of doing, of the powers coursing up and down through his arms and face. He is aware that he could reach out and kill Foolish, he is aware of himself in a way he has never been.

Nothing is breaking, nothing is ripping itself apart at Tommy's insistence, there is nothing but a quiet bubbling anger and grief underneath his skin.

Anger has always been something that's come naturally to Tommy. Tommy thinks he was born angry and he's going to die that way. He's going to die angry, with blood on his knuckles and a curse on his tongue.

"What?" Tommy whispers, "Spit it out you fucking coward what the fuck are you stumbling over?"

"Tommy," Techno's eyes snap to him, "calm down."

"Go fuck yourself."

He knows that Techno is just afraid of Tommy's powers lashing out.

For once in his life, Tommy isn't afraid of it. This is the strongest he's ever been, this is the most control he's ever had over any of his powers. While there's a blistering heat at the ends of his hands, like his powers are trying to push themselves out of him— Tommy can control it.

So he does.

Foolish looks at Techno, then at Tommy who is still clearly hooked up to several machines that are monitoring everything. The machine beeps rapidly as Tommy's heart rate rises.

"He's my best friend!" Tommy yells, "you can't avoid telling me shit like I'm a little kid!"

"You *are* a kid, Tommy," Techno says, "just— we don't have any real details yet. What happened, Foolish?"

Foolish glances at Tommy, "maybe— maybe we should talk about this outside," Purpled's blood is still smearing Foolish's chestplate and his clothes, his hair is still drenched but slowly drying out.

Techno gives Tommy a slightly desperate glance before nodding his head.

The two of them leave the room and that cold anger in Tommy's chest slowly starts to turn hot.

So Tommy is left to seethe in his new rage, the rage that he's being treated like a child when Tommy had any form of childhood ripped away from him when he was four years old and his mum stabbed him in the neck with a needle that would change everything. The rage at the possibility Purpled is hurt— Purpled wouldn't be hurt, right?

He's responsible— he doesn't do reckless shit, he's not Tommy.

What the fuck?

He strains his ears the best he can, but is left with nothing over the sound of his own machine beeping rapidly in his ear.

Everything feels loose in his chest, like someone has just walked up to him and plucked something out of his heart and smashed it on the ground. He feels… fragile in a way he hasn't in a long time.

It all feels fuzzy— his brain feels fuzzy and he can't focus on much else than that fuzziness in his own head.

And still, his powers are held at bay. They're more painful now, pressing against his hands and chest as they nearly beg to be released— months of being gone with no use and now they're back and hungry and desperate to show themselves.

He reins in the pushing feeling the best he can.

He is in the hero tower, he can not lose control right now.

So he looks at his hands, to try and calm himself— to try and let the gnawing anger dissipate. Instead, the veins in his wrist are glowing red. They pulse with each breath, getting a little bit brighter with each inhale and dimmer with each exhale.

On the pads of his fingers are small black spots, his finger tips are filled with these black spots that he doesn't know where they came from. It looks like black ink, but doesn't smudge to the touch.

Hybrid traits.

The thought swings into his mind and like that he checks, his fingers find his way to his teeth, running across all of them. Something pricks his finger and Tommy swears, drawing his finger away from his canine teeth.

He feels down his sides for any signs of feathers— anything avian but is met with nothing.

Purpled might be dead, Tommy's fingers look like a primary school student's who got bored and dotted ink all over them. Purpled might be dead— and Tommy's veins are starting to glow red. Purpled might be dead and Tommy's teeth are sharper.

Purpled might be dead and Tommy is making this about himself.

The IV is still in his arm. Tommy knows pulling IVs out is a poor idea. IVs are in your veins and Tommy can do all kinds of damage with that if he isn't careful. He doesn't particularly fancy the idea of fucking up his veins and blood more than he already has.

But… they might not let him leave otherwise. There's a whirring noise in his head as Tommy tries to figure it out— he can refuse care.

If Techno and Foolish aren't going to give him any fucking answers he will find them himself.

He rolls over, fumbling at the small cabinet next to the bed. He hopes to find his phone or— something helpful. His phone is in fact there, but it looks smashed— like it fell down a stairwell.

That might be the worst thing Sam has ever done to him.

On the cabinet are also a set of clothes— they don't really look like Tommy's clothes, they look more like Techno's clothes but they'll fit well enough. While Techno has more muscle, they're about the same height and Tommy will die before wearing anything that isn't a hoodie.

Tommy reaches for the hoodie— it's a bright blue hoodie that on second thought Tommy has never seen Techno wear. It has a price tag on the back of it for far too much— Techno bought it for him.

Which in most circumstances would be sweet enough to stop Tommy from being mad at Techno, but not this time. This time Techno is treating him like someone incapable of making their own decisions and Tommy half wants to tear his throat out because of it.

The anger dies a little as the door swings open and Techno walks back into the room, he looks so much more tired than when he left and the expression on his face looks a lot more serious. Techno is a pretty serious person, but something about the curve of his mouth and the furrow of his eyebrows resets something in Tommy's brain.

"Are you alright?" Tommy asks for reasons he doesn't really understand.

Techno nods, his eyes are glassy.

Whatever dwindling hope Tommy could have about— them getting Purpled mixed up for someone else or Purpled being fine is slowly dying in his chest.

The threads on Tommy's worlds are threatening to unravel because *Purpled can't be dead.* Purpled isn't the— isn't the sort of person that dies. He survived being shot in the Elysium tower attack, he's survived his entire life so far—

Why would that be different now?

He's already lost Tubbo— Tubbo could be dead and rotting and Tommy has no idea.

He can not survive losing Purpled too.

Techno moves, sitting on the edge of the bed, "um—" Techno says, he takes a deep breath and closes his eyes, "basically what we think happened is uh—"

A rather young girl shuffles into the room, she has dyed blonde hair that is up in a high ponytail and an awkward expression on her face as she looks between Tommy and Techno, "uh… I'm sorry to interrupt—"

Techno whirls around, eyes turning into daggers as the girl withers under his expression.

“Um— uh—” she says slowly, “I’m sorry, Mr Nelson-Jones has requested a rather urgent meeting with you. He was waiting until you came back to the building, that’s all.”

“Can it wait five fucking minutes?” Techno snaps.

“Uh— I don’t think so, sir,” the young woman says, “he was uh— rather adamant about the importance of this conversation.”

Techno grits his teeth and for a split second Tommy thinks Techno is going to turn around and literally bite someone.

He doesn’t though, he keeps his jaw clenched with enough force that for a moment Tommy thinks it could explode. Techno stands, glaring to a level that for a split second Tommy is nearly afraid of him.

Techno turns towards the doorway, taking a few long steps before turning around and glancing over his shoulder.

“Stay here,” Techno says.

“Okay.”

“I mean it.”

“I know.”

“I’ll be like ten minutes,” Techno gives Tommy one last look, “I mean it, Underscore.”

“Mhm.”

One minute later, Tommy has counted about how long it takes to get to an elevator from most places in the tower. Techno should be stepping into an elevator soon and a meeting with William Nelson-Jones can not be interrupted for one kid trying to get out of hospital.

The easiest part is peeling off the little bandaid holding it in place, then Tommy takes a deep breath and closes his eyes as his fingers curl around the part closest to his skin. He grips the edge of the IV needle with two fingers.

Then he pulls.

It comes out easier than Tommy honestly expected. The blood starts pouring right away, but Tommy decides *fuck the heroes* and rips a sheet off of his pillow case which he wraps fairly tightly around his forearm.

He pulls the clothes over his hospital gown, hops around for his shoes and socks that were placed at the end of the bed. He shoves his broken phone in his pocket just in case.

And just like that, as easy as breathing, Tommy leaves the small private room he was put in and heads down the hallway.

He's really looking for Foolish, but other heroes who look drenched in rain will be a good enough option for him as well.

He walks quietly, able to use little parts of density manipulation to make his footsteps near silent as he roams down the hallway. Techno and Foolish wouldn't have gone far, and Foolish won't be far from wherever those two went.

"Why is no one picking up!"

The muffled voice from another private hospital ward a few doors down makes Tommy snap his head towards it, it's clearly Foolish's voice.

Tommy glances around, spying a camera at the end of the hall.

Break, he thinks.

And it does.

Without any sort of red flashes or sparks or anything, the small red beeping light in the camera turns off. The camera bows slightly, facing more towards the ground as it stops recording the hall.

Tommy walks to the open door, stopping just before the opening. He pulls out his phone to try and use the blackened screen as some sort of mirror that he faces into the room.

It's a room very similar to the room Tommy had been in. There are a few chairs, there's a bed which has rumpled fabric on it like someone had just been sitting there. The most interesting thing is a small pile of photos that have been thrown onto the bed.

Foolish is standing to the furthest side of the room, eyes looking out of the small window. His back is completely to Tommy.

There's no camera in the room too, meaning that Tommy can get in and out of there without a problem in the slightest.

While he might need to explain his behaviour of *why* he left, he shouldn't have been seen doing anything too sketchy. The explanation will be easy enough he can—

He can make something up about trauma.

At this point it's not even inaccurate, he has a trauma for every situation and he should probably start utilising it more than he does.

Tommy peaks his head around again.

Foolish is standing with his back towards Tommy, he has a phone in one hand and is running his hair with the other, "pick up you bastard," Foolish mutters underneath his breath.

So as gently as he can, his powers are let go of.

The pictures on the bed start sliding off, small red sparks coming off of them as they land on the floor. Tommy raises his other hand before doing a tugging motion.

The effort of trying to keep it quiet is more than he remembers— he can feel his powers trying to escape and fight out around him, and it's taking nearly all of his concentration to keep his powers at such a little rate.

"Do you know his status— if you don't this is going to cause some real big problems for us."

Somehow the small pile of photos pulls towards him, sliding against the linoleum floor, and Tommy snatches them up.

He whirls back around so his back is leaning against the wall next to the door frame.

He cradles the photos to his chest.

"What the fuck does she know about this? Weren't you in charge of this mission—"

Tommy looks down at the photos.

The first one is of the Heroes Hall, a museum that Tommy has never been to— he never really had the money and then he didn't really care once he started working for the heroes and got money. The most noticeable thing is the entire front of it has been blown up, and more importantly a statue of someone is hanging by the neck from the front of the building.

The next few photos are of that statue— the statue of William Nelson-Jones, if the plaque attached to the base of the statue is correct. 'Murderer' is painted up the length of the statue, he's held in place around the neck by some sturdy looking rope and some sort of pulley system on the front of the building.

Painted sloppily onto the statue as well, is a purple flower where the paint is starting to drip off of it. One was painted inside and the Elysium symbol was painted outside, almost as an afterthought.

The tenth photo is what makes Tommy stop.

That's what makes Tommy unable to breathe and think and like his world is starting to crumble in again.

In an alleyway that must be around the building— Tommy isn't sure where he's never been to this place, there is a bloodied mess of *something* against the wall. Smears and smudges— that look too familiar, that look like if someone's been shot and tried to get up.

There's more on the ground too, a dark stain that is slowly being washed away by rain.

It's so much blood and Tommy doesn't know how much of it must have gotten washed away.

Above it, scratched out into the wooden paint of the building is a clear symbol— an obsidian iris, it's done poorly and like someone quickly finished it with a knife.

It feels like a clear message.

There is no reason Techno wouldn't have just shown these photos— unless there's more context, unless there's the context of who the blood belongs to. Nothing else makes sense, these photos were specifically *about* this situation.

The next photos are of the scene, as more and more stain gets washed away. Closer detailing of the blood and the alleyway and the flower carved into the wall above wherever this body was put.

And like that he knows, he knows what happened to Purpled.

If Elysium wants to bring Theseus out of retirement. That's fine. They can bring him out of retirement.

He drops the photos onto the floor.

He has a mask to find.

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The only real thought in Techno's head is *are you fucking kidding me, are you fucking kidding me— why is this my life are you fucking kidding me?* The further and further he walks away from Tommy and the closer he gets to the lion den.

This floor isn't one that Techno goes to a lot.

He hates every part of it— the fancy white furniture and the way interns run around like they're expecting to get yelled at every second. (To be fair, Techno did just kind of yell at an intern.) So Techno squares his shoulders and sets his jaw as he walks straight through to where he knows Nelson-Jones's office is.

He is not here to fuck spiders.

Techno approaches the large wooden doors that provide the only real sense of colour in this area of the building. Someone talks at him as he stalks forwards, saying something about appointments and being busy and—

He pushes both of the double doors, swinging them open.

Nelson-Jones's office is relatively small for who he is. The back wall is just a giant window, which Techno *knows* is enforced. Nelson-Jones is sitting at his desk, looking as corpseish as ever. He looks thinner and more exhausted and both of those factors set a little firework of joy off in his stomach.

"What?" Techno asks.

Nelson-Jones looks up from whatever he's writing, eyes landing on Techno before his mouth curls up into a smile. He closes the notebook he was writing in, snapping the little elastic strap over it and pushing it to the corner of his table.

"Techno, it has been *far* too long—"

"Cut the bullshit," Techno walks the rest of the distance across the room, standing in front of the table. "What the fuck do you need me for?"

"You attacked one of my best heroes."

"And one of your best heroes tried to kill a teenager by overdosing him," Techno returns, "I acted accordingly given the circumstance and honestly the fact that your best hero is alive is a fucking miracle. Now what do you want?"

Nelson-Jones chuckles, he clicks the end of the pen he's still holding before putting it in a neatly arranged pencil holder on the other corner of his desk, "you have always had such a manner of speaking, Techno. Most grow out of that when they reach adulthood."

"You mean you intimidate the other into learning to prettify their language for you, yeah, I know. Notice how you're still avoiding the question, what do you actually want? Yeah I— beat up a guy who attacked a teenager."

"Nineteen is hardly a teenager," Nelson-Jones waves his hand.

"Okay—" Techno takes a deep breath, "say the word nineteen again but slowly— tell me the last four letters of that word and what those letters mean. Explain it to me like I've never had a thought in my life—"

"Do you ever shut up?" Nelson-Jones snaps, "I am trying to speak and you are not letting me get a single thought out."

"Oh? So not a fan when the manipulation tactics are used against you, so sorry."

Techno spies a rather comfortable looking armchair from across the room, he strides over to it, before dragging it back in front of Nelson-Jones desk. He sits down on it, crossing his legs and folding his arms.

Nelson-Jones looks unimpressed at best.

He's kind of always looked that way when it's come to Techno.

"Do you know why the heroes are so important?" Nelson-Jones asks.

"So they can enforce the status quo and inherently the ruling class— which is you, by the way," Techno shifts in the chair a little.

The chair is genuinely quite comfortable, it feels nice on his back. He should get one like this for home, and pray Floof doesn't sit in it all the time. Floof tends to sit on the softest, fluffiest thing he can find and this chair does both of those things.

Nelson-Jones sighs, a deep exhale coming out of his nose, “you are— exhausting.”

“Good.”

“Because a world without heroes is a terrifying one to live in— one where there is no one to deal with superpowered threats. Things can run rampant, we need people who are willing to devote their lives to training to fight other superpowered people, the threats.”

Techno really does not care for the sob story if he’s going to be completely honest with himself.

Nelson-Jones leans back in his chair, folding his hands together and placing them on the desk in front of him, “you are far too young to remember it— there was a time without heroes, and that was a time that a lot of people sent in poverty. That is a time where districts did not exist and areas were run by— essentially warlords. Whoever was the most powerful got the land.”

“How *old* are you?”

“Old enough to know how it used to be,” Nelson-Jones says, “old enough to know that if this falls there is nothing in place to stop things from going back to how they used to be. So imagine the concern I have knowing that the faith Logstedchire has in the heroes is crumbling, and other districts may follow.”

Techno just stays quiet.

Nelson-Jones sighs again, like even thinking about this is exhausting, “someone recently opened my eyes shall we say to the hatred of people in Logstedchire. That is understandable, and I expect that is a trust that will not be earnt back easily.”

Techno narrows his eyes.

“And you are our most prominent hero from Logstedchire,” Nelson-Jones smiles, it stretches his skin in an uncomfortable way, like he’s not quite used to smiling. He doesn’t have smile lines at all. “People from there still claim you as one of them, as you have never been ashamed of your home district.”

“What’s there to be ashamed about?” Techno snaps.

Nelson-Jones just raises an eyebrow, “there is much to be ashamed about when it comes to Logstedchire.”

Techno bites his tongue— he needs to see where this is going. Screaming about how none of this is fair and most of the ‘shameful’ things in Logstedchire are the fault of other people. Blue distribution, poverty— all of those were policy choices.

Policy choices that Techno would bet his entire life savings on that Nelson-Jones had a sway in.

“Despite the reasons for shame, that’s never effected you. So I suggest something quite simple— improve our perception in Logstedchire.”

“What?” Techno balks, “no fucking way— are you out of your mind? First you give me Pandora’s or being a hero— I do not want to work to undo all the bad fucking favour *you* spent decades making. Those policy decisions coming back to bite you in the ass now?”

“Thomas lives in Logstedchire, doesn’t he?”

Techno feels his heart pause in his chest.

“It’s on his file— I became quite interested after the incident earlier today. I truly hadn’t known much about him beforehand. His apartment is not up to safety standards I’m sure.”

Techno can barely breathe let alone *think,* because like that Nelson-Jones has hit at the weak spot. The thing that’ll make him crumble straight away, the thing that means he can’t currently think because Tommy is in danger.

Nelson-Jones knows Tommy is in Logstedchire, and that’s *if* he doesn’t know Tommy is Theseus— which he very well might.

“You work to get public perception back in our favour,” Nelson-Jones says, “I allow you and your trainees the routes in Logstedchire that you have been doing anyway— do not think those got by me.”

It’s the first time someone has— tried to swindle Techno like this. It’s the first time anyone’s had the balls to *try* , because he’s Techno. Up until very recently all his connections were inside the hero tower.

No one has… tried with Tommy before.

Techno’s brain feels like it’s reeling with it.

He didn’t… know someone could try this on him. He didn’t know how easy it would be— because Techno’s going to agree, of course he is.

“And the incident earlier today will be entirely forgiven— Tommy will be allowed as much time as he needs off work and Sam will be disciplined publicly and appropriately.”

He’s desperate, something clawing in Techno’s mind yells at him. If Nelson-Jones is willing to actually discipline a hero— maybe not enough, but publicly. Nelson-Jones is fucking desperate to improve the relationship with Logstedchire.

Techno knows that’s a sinking ship.

It’s about fifteen years too late to start now.

But it keeps Tommy safe— and that's the only thing he’s ever actually wanted. It keeps Sniff and Aimsey safe as long as Techno complies, it gives them permission to do Logstedchire routes and it keeps some of the pressure off of Phil’s back.

“Limit the curfews,” Techno says, “get rid of Pandora’s. Build more community housing and centres in Logstedchire— the issue is not with heroes and the fact half of them can’t *eat,* and

when they steal so they can eat that's the only time the police or heroes act in Logstedchire. While the businesses with their shoddy business practices go free."

Nelson-Jones smiles, it's short at best.

"Sorry," he says, "that's just not within our scope… I'll pass the message onto President Jenkins."

Techno grits his teeth, "I'm sure you have no sway in policy."

The smile continues, "I'm not an elected official, I have no sway in policy."

Techno can't do much more than let his entire face show the disdain he feels in his stomach. Instead of doing something incredibly drastic— like flipping the table or throwing Nelson-Jones out of the window he takes a deep breath.

He needs to calm down.

Then before he knows it he's standing up, picking the coffee mug on the desk and smashing it on the ground.

Nelson-Jones stares at the mug, something nearly like shock flashing across his face for a split seconds before he controls his face again. All Techno can think about is the fury thundering through his blood.

"Sorry," Techno's tone is more than murderous, he's talked to people he's actually killed kinder than he's talking to Nelson-Jones, "piglin thing. Have no control over it."

"Just as I have no sway in government, I'm sure."

The shattered mug crunches underneath his feet as Techno walks back towards the door.

"It seems you haven't made a decision on my offer, Techno."

"You already know my choice, *William* ," Techno says, not daring to turn around, he keeps his eyes fixated on the wooden doors in front of him, "you wouldn't have brought up Tommy if you didn't."

"Ah," Nelson-Jones laughs, "it only took nearly a decade but finally you're learning how things operate here."

Techno can't bring himself to care, he has a kid he needs to go look after— that he needs to explain news that makes Techno's heart want to rip itself from the inside out.

- - -

Tubbo glances up from where he's hunched over the report. His eyes are going blurry from how much he's been reading it. His eyes scan over the words for the thousandth time.

Cyclooxygenase-2 → (limiting) prostaglandins

G C A A C G T T A G A

The words are basically tattooed in his mind now, still he keeps reading them over and over again— it's basically the end of the day. They're packing up, they've run through two other people and every time Tubbo thinks of Pac and what happened he wants to throw up a little.

Pac shouldn't be that— docile.

He's bright and sarcastic and— it's weird to see someone so still.

"Tubbo?" someone yells from outside, "are you still in there?"

"Yeah!" Tubbo yells back, "just uh— struggling with the filing again. Wait! Nevermind!" Tubbo rummages through a random filing cabinet like he's found it, "found it!"

There's a gentle laugh from outside the room.

With ease Tubbo slides the important parts of the report against his side. He zips his sky blue jumpsuit back up, then using a rubber band he found fastens the jumpsuit so it's fairly tight around his sides.

The pieces of paper are tucked between his undershirt and the jumpsuit. He tries to puff his chest out slightly so the paper is even more wedged between the two items of clothing. He could put them in his pockets but there's a non-zero chance they'll check.

As long as he walks normally it should be fine.

He still has bruising on his ribs from when he was thrown in the cell, worst case he can just hold his ribs and claim that's why.

Tubbo swings the door to the filing cabinet room open, giving the scientist who was waiting for him a small smile. The guard next to the scientist doesn't look as pleasant, she looks more like she's only even eaten lemons.

He doesn't take too big of steps as he's led out of the room, he can feel where the papers are pressed against his clothes. He knows it's not obvious and the papers have moulded around the shape of his torso.

It's just— starting to slide.

Only a little bit, but everytime Tubbo breathes it slides a little bit further down. He holds his breath as every step echoes out through the hallway. It takes all he has to keep his cool as he's paraded through the halls.

A hand is wrapped around his shoulder like Tubbo is a strong person which… well, he's not. Tubbo isn't dumb enough to try and run, let alone fight. He tries to puff his chest out a little more so the paper stops sliding.

It's about at his hip now, starting to slide down the wide leg of the jumpsuit pants. Why did no one tailor these suits, they're so loose— who thought of that? Tubbo needs to talk to them,

what the fuck is this?

His cell is at the end of the hall, and the paper is slowly sliding down his leg. He walks a little strange to try and stop it sliding, but it slides and slides until it's caught on the edge of his shoe.

The orange barrier comes down.

Tubbo stumbles into the cell as the papers slide onto the ground. For a moment Tubbo fears it's all over, but the barrier is already up behind him and everything is okay.

He gives himself just a moment to breathe in and out— okay— thank fuck. He got the reports in here effectively— next time he's just going to tie them to him or something because that was ridiculous and so risky and nearly undid everything Tubbo was trying to do here.

Pac is laying on the bed, arm thrown over his face. The noise makes him sit up slowly, his eyes look red around the rims and slightly hazy, "oh, Tubbo. Hi."

"Hi?" Tubbo picks the pieces of paper up off the ground, shielding his back to the camera just in case, "are you— good?"

"Yeah… just the power things— take it out of me y'know. I used to just sleep the whole day after they got me."

"You turn— kinda scary in that room."

Pac smiles lazily, "fighting back got too hard, hurt too much— it's sometimes just easier to accept it."

A bite of anger rises in Tubbo's throat. No one should just *accept this* , not the being stabbed with drugs and other things, not the bullshit that comes with Pandora's— Tubbo *does* need to bring up why Pac is in here eventually.

Vigilantism…

Not an easy crime to get charged with— especially before all the Phantom stuff went down. Tubbo doesn't remember it well on account of… not being in L'Manberg when all of that happened and in fact, living in London.

Still, details.

"So," Tubbo says, "I was struggling to figure out *what* they were doing— that took me a shit tonne of time. I couldn't really understand what was going on because I didn't really know anyone else's powers— but then you came in and I know your powers."

"Should you be… saying this in here?" Pac asks, eyes skirting up to the camera.

"It's a DVR camera," Tubbo doesn't even spare it a glance, "it'll all be stored on a harddrive connected to the camera— they seem to be using old technology for their cameras because they don't think anyone can break out. That does mean that they'll only know to look at the

harddrive if they think anything is wrong. We could also just unplug the DVR from the camera but that's a bit much work right now— actually I should probably straight up do that and try and mess with the harddrive to remove even this conversation."

Pac stares at him for a few moments, looking pleasantly surprised, "you are— clever, Tubbo."

"Thanks!" Tubbo grins, "good thing the scientists are doubting the kid from Logstedchire— because as everyone knows no one clever has ever lived in Logstedchire."

Pac laughs, "no, no one. I can not think of a single one."

For *some* reason the beds aren't bolted into the wall, which means Tubbo gets to drag his bed underneath the camera. He hops on the bed, fumbling around with the wires behind the camera before he finds a connecting wire.

He glances at Pac.

Then he pulls the wire.

Nothing happens, so Tubbo hops off the bed landing on the ground next to Pac.

He drags the bed back to its original spot with a grin, "and just like that— we good. Has anyone ever come in to check that?"

"Uh— I'm not quite sure. They might do it while we're at breakfast, y'know everyone out of the area. Can we say the wire went loose?"

"Yeah, that should be fine, it's old tech and was easy to pull out anyway."

Tubbo plonks himself on Pac's bed, he drops the report between them.

"So these are your files— they rightfully figured out one part of your powers is limiting the effect Cyclooxygenase-2 has on producing prostaglandins."

"That's what makes my powers nullify pain, yeah?"

"Yep," Tubbo pulls a pen out of his pocket, "and then they're looking for the specific genes that allow you to do that. They've sequenced it and I *think* they've found what they were looking for a while ago, and then using a bunch of freaky biomedical engineering shit, they're trying to essentially weaken that gene without killing you. I also think they're using Nanopore-based DNA sequencing, but that's besides the point."

Pac just blinks at him, "is it?"

"It just means they can use your molecules multiple times, which they can't do with other methods. But that leads to the question of— why are they trying to isolate the genetics that cause powers within people?"

“To later learn how to make them stronger?” Pac suggests, “it would make sense, that’s what they tried to do with blue and failed.”

Tubbo clicks his tongue, “close— I think they’re trying to come up with a way to erase powers entirely.”

Pac just stares at him, mouth open.

“If they were working on strengthening powers there would be volunteers they could use, why would they be doing this research on people in Pandora’s?”

“Then… if they learn how to remove powers from certain people… they can keep it so the people *they* want to have powers have powers.”

“Exactly!” Tubbo slams his hand down on the paper, “I reckon right now they’re trying to target the most common powers— minor healing, strength, speed, but they very well might move onto more complex powers that have more genes involved in it. They’re trying to figure out the science of a lot of powers— then the genetics that power them.”

Pac hums, “that makes sense, start with the easy and common stuff first.”

“Then I reckon they’re using CRISPR-Cas to try and do genome editing. It’s a method they use by using bacteria enzymes. Basically if a bacteria survives an attack it’ll keep part of the virus in an enzyme. If the enzyme detects that it’ll rip it out and replace it with fucking useless DNA. Then they use that to replace a gene— for example, yours with your powers.”

“And they have to do it multiple times because genetics aren’t that easy, right?”

“Yes! They would have to do it multiple times, and with something as complex as powers it probably has multiple genes involved, meaning this would take— a lot of gene therapy sessions in order to completely remove it. Which would explain why there are so many of the same genome sequencing on one report, they’re looking to see after each session if the genes are changing.”

Pac shifts a little, “does this mean they could remove dangerous powers? The ones that get children killed because they can’t control them?”

“I—” Tubbo opens and closes his mouth, “in theory.”

“Do you think you should keep this to yourself then?” Pac asks, “with all of the lives this could save.”

“I don’t… I don’t think the government has shown they can be trusted with this,” Tubbo stares down at Pac’s report, “I mean they have the technology *now* and they’re using it to depower criminals rather than help those kids. I don’t think a private company can be trusted with this but— Nelson-Jones can’t be trusted with it either.”

Tubbo glances back up at Pac.

Pac is grinning at him.

“Did I say the right thing?”

“You said the right thing,” Pac smiles back, “alright— so we want to get this information out, yes?”

“We’d want to get it out to my friends. Nelson-Jones has done a lot of things but this is directly imposing on the right to bodily autonomy in Pandora’s and his previous track record in policy means he’s going to try and target Logstedchire with it. What if they start doing it on people in Logstedchire when they’re born— or even before they’re born? It’s just another way Nelson-Jones can gain more unopposed power.”

“Alright,” Pac sits back, “who do we need to get this information to?”

“Aimsey Teese— they’re the— most competent person I know and they have a good team with them.”

“Well… let’s make your case and get it sent out of here.”

And despite the fear of it all— and the very real possibility Tubbo is going to fuck this up. It can’t get much worse for him apart from death— and death is already something he has a feeling he’s going to be flirting with on a semi-regular basis now.

So he might as well try and get something out of this— they might send him to jail for *longer* but he’s here indefinitely anyway.

It quickly appears he’s becoming the most competent member of Anemoi, between stealing all the data first and now—

He’s fucking good at what he does.

Maybe Tubbo can’t get out of here, but he’s pretty sure he can give it a red hot fucking go at collapsing it from the inside and making sure no one ever has to come here again.

- - -

The mask fits.

It all still fits.

Tommy knew it would— of fucking course it would, he hasn’t grown in the months that it has sat underneath his bed collecting dust. The boots and pants and hoodie still fit, the goggles are still set the way that wraps around his head.

He sets the mask on his legs.

Techno isn’t going to tell him what’s wrong with Purpled while Tommy’s powers are so unstable and he’s in such a dangerous place. All roads lead to Elysium— all roads lead to those photos being related to Purpled because *why else* would they have been used when Foolish and Techno talked?

He could just go as Tommy, he knows that.

He is going as Tommy either way— masked or not.

If Purpled is dead— he can't be. Purpled doesn't just *die* .

What next?

Tommy stares at the mask on his leg, the fastenings that go around his ears and the weird stain from that one time when he dropped a burrito on it that he never managed to get out. At this point the mask is probably a biohazard.

He picks up the mask, staring at it.

Logstedchire needs Tommy, and that alone is terrifying. That's always been terrifying but can Tommy really allow himself to sit by while all the protests are happening? Aurelian and Slime and Purpled are left to pick up the slack and for what?

Tommy stares at the mask for a few more seconds.

He can feel his powers surging inside of him, fighting to be let out. Tommy can keep them under control for now.

Reddings. Ask about Purpled.

He can't be dead— Techno would've told him straight away if Purpled was dead. He wouldn't have left Tommy in this state of unknowing especially when Foolish's reaction was what it was.

Tommy can't assume the worst—

And still, Tommy's stomach is still full of dread.

Because something or someone— especially not Elysium— can't just have plucked Purpled out of the world and now he doesn't exist. That's not how this works, that's not how any of this has ever worked.

Tommy holds his mask with shaking hands.

With a quiet sigh he puts it back on.

It fits— it was always going to fit.

He pulls the goggles on, bringing up his hood the way he used to. Pinning the hood to his head is more difficult than it used to be from the lack of practice, but he manages to get it fairly connected to his head.

Theseus— Tommy— both and neither at the same time.

He's himself.

He doesn't know exactly what that means, he doesn't know every detail of who he is and what he wants and which version of him is *real.* He does know in this state— they're both real, and they're both him.

He takes a deep breath, before opening the window he spent most of his time hopping out of. Then he jumps out, soaring through the air for just a moment— before realising he's in fact falling.

Tommy yelps, throwing both of his arms out below him.

Two bursts of bright red energy explode out of his hands, and Tommy is sent careening upwards, limbs flying through the air in no way that is graceful.

He manages to get his bearings, before clasping his hands over the edge of the building.

Tommy hauls himself up onto the building, rolling onto his back and puffing.

He looks up at the sky for a moment.

This used to be a lot easier.

Maybe he should just take public transport.

Tommy rolls onto his front, pushing himself up off of the ground slowly. He shakes out his arms and legs as sparks flick off his hands onto the concrete of the roof he's on. Tommy takes a deep breath.

He can do this.

He takes off in a run, hopping over the next few buildings because anything with his powers feels wildly risky right about now. Until he gets to a building that verges on the edge of a wide, busy road.

Meaning. Time to jump it.

Tommy sighs.

This *was* way easier before.

Tommy still hates heights. Now he's about to voluntarily walk off a building.

He pin-drops off the side of the building, before immediately shoving his hands in the direction of the building. The energy that explodes from his hands sends him flying to the side, towards the other building.

He's able to watch the road fly beneath him as he soars, the cars look like ants, the people even more so—

He slams into the building he was aiming for.

Worst of all, glass shatters againsmt his back and Tommy rolls backwards. Tommy yelps as he smacks his head against something solid and for a moment his entire world is hazy.

Tommy blinks a few times, before realising— he's ended up in someone's bathroom.

If this gets on Twitter it's going to be very embarrassing for him.

He's laying in someone's bathtub, limbs sprawled out and head hanging half out of it. His back hurts, his arms hurt— everything hurts. How in the everloving fuck did he manage this not that long ago?

"Ow," Tommy says mostly to himself as he sits up. There's glass shards all over his clothes, thankfully none of it has actually pierced him— a benefit of wearing a trillion layers whenever you do anything, he supposes.

Tommy sighs, brushing glass shards off into the bath.

He pats his pockets down, finding a spare twenty dollars he stuffed in his pants pockets— probably from years ago at this point. It's not nearly enough to make up for the window— maybe Tommy can drop off more money later.

He drops the twenty dollar note in the bathtub, before clambering out of the window again.

Tommy manages to climb up onto the top of the building old style, his arms are shaking and he can barely breathe by the time he rolls onto the roof.

Was this always this hard?

Is Tommy getting old?

Would Elysium authorise Purpled being killed?

One of those thoughts is distinctly not like the other, and Tommy does his best to shove it out of his head. Yes, he's old. No, it wasn't always this hard, he's just gotten less good at running and scampering over buildings because he hasn't had to do it.

What does he do if Purpled is dead?

Does the world just stop spinning— does everything stop? Will Tommy's heart explode in his chest, will—

Why would Elysium do that?

Why would—

Tommy lets out a shuddering breath as he tries to calm himself down. It doesn't make any difference because it feels like his body needs to explode out of himself— what happened to Purpled and why were Foolish and Techno so dodgy about it?

Tears sting his eyes.

His head hurts.

His ribs hurt.

Being alive is kind of hurting at the moment if Tommy is going to be completely honest with himself. He takes another deep breath as he presses his hands to his goggles, like that will stop anything from happening.

He can't be dead— he can't— who in Elysium would allow that to happen? Why would they? It doesn't—

Tommy wipes at his goggles again before realising that's useless and not how goggles work slightly.

His next breath is somewhere between a sigh and a choked sob. If they did kill Purpled it makes sense Techno wouldn't want to tell him right? Techno likes Elysium— Techno wouldn't want Tommy to tear it apart.

Nothing is fucking making sense.

Tommy leans his head against the concrete— nothing makes sense. There are so many motives and reasons and Tommy just wants his best friend to be alive. He just wants Purpled to be okay but is he— he doesn't— he doesn't know.

And now he's curled into a ball on a rooftop and his head is on concrete that has never been cleaned and his goggles are a mess from the tears and still he can feel his powers coursing inside of his body.

Tommy closes his mouth, he's not going to cry— he's not going to fucking cry that's embarrassing.

He brings the collar of his hoodie into his mouth and bites it, trying to stop himself from screaming.

Where the fuck is Purpled?

Why the fuck is no one telling him— because the only thing that's making sense right now is that Elysium killed him and Techno doesn't want Tommy to go and tear Elysium apart with his bare fucking hands.

He takes another deep breath, he can do this.

He's just going to ask questions. He's not going to be unreasonable about it— Elysium killing Purpled makes no sense, it doesn't— why would they—

Did they want Theseus back?

Tommy's stomach lurches at the thought.

Did Elysium want Theseus back?

Is this his fucking fault?

It would make sense, wouldn't it? If it was his fault.

Tommy pushes himself off of the ground, brushes the various shit that got on his knee and takes one more deep breath. He tilts his head back like that'll make the tears go away— it doesn't make anything go away.

Another deep breath.

Okay.

He's okay.

Everything feels a bit blurry after that, Tommy doesn't have to think about what he's doing with his powers as much— his powers more— make up the gap in his brain that Tommy isn't filling right now.

A lot of it is just skipping over various things, just jumping and parkour and the stuff that Purpled helped teach him all those years ago and—

Fuck.

He gets a relatively smooth run until he ends up in the warehouse districts, he knows that the start of Reddings begins here. He knows the old fish factory the entrance is in, and he remembers the crates it used to be behind.

He remembers the code too.

Tommy stops at the edge of a building. He can feel the sparks of his powers falling off of his body. Actually getting here was a blur, it's hazy and fuzzy and Tommy hates just about all of it because *fuck* it hurts.

His head is still aching, his ribs might be fucked.

His hand trails over his rib looking for damage— he knows about bruised ribs. Everything feels fine.

The factory looks different to how it did when Tommy last saw it, it's nicer now, there are flowers and a little dirt footpath and the grass around the building is growing in small patches. Which… probably means something about Elysium activity around the building.

Alright.

This building is still a factory, factories have tall roofs and the last time Tommy was here it was no exception. Meaning— that most people won't be looking up, meaning Tommy can get in that way and observe what the fuck he's dealing with.

He's not going in through the front though. He brings himself around the side of the buildings, his eyes scan the front of the factory. No one goes in or out as he moves from a

position at the front of the building, to the side of the building.

There are no buildings close enough for Tommy to just jump off onto the roof without using his powers, and those have been— unreliable at best when it comes to moving him around spaces.

So instead he's probably going to do this the old fashioned way— scaling the side of a building. This factory has tall walls, Tommy remembers that from last time. He can climb in a broken window and call it a fucking day.

Tommy steps off the edge of the building he's standing on.

At the last second before he hits the ground he uses his powers to throw himself up slightly and change the density around himself— just for a split second—

He hits the grass with a gentle noise.

He's made it to the side of the building, and takes a deep breath as he propels himself up the side of the building. His hand catches on a metal pipe or something hanging from the wall belonging to the second storey of the factory.

With a small grunt he swings his legs into the open hole that used to be a window. The glass and panes were taken out long ago. Tommy positions himself so he's sitting on the window ledge.

Below him are people— the entire space is entirely different.

In the middle it looks like there's a bunch of desks, there's a couple of people around those. To the side is a kitchen that looks particularly busy. There seems to be another area for kids to be playing, and they are playing there. There are people around— but Tommy isn't particularly nervous about it.

The crates were— just about where the kitchen is now.

He gives himself a moment, just a second to lean his head against the side of the wall.

It seems in the kitchen area there is a trapdoor of some kind, it's pressed in the back of the room and all the people cooking in the aforementioned kitchen are around— but Tommy can probably open it and drop through.

All he really needs to do is just— get around to the other side of the factory

There's a couple of ways that Tommy can do that, the easiest is just walking around the building and hopping back up on the other side. There are… however, rafters along the top of this factory.

And Tommy has missed using his powers.

So as gentle as he can, he pushes himself out.

The second he soars through the air, between the ledge he's found himself and the beam he's jumping to is glorious. Tommy is in complete control, and it's only a short drop if he loses the control he knows he has.

His feet hit the beams and he drops his centre of gravity lower so he doesn't topple over the edge.

Staying low, he moves his way over so he's crouched towards the kitchen. People are chattering and moving and talking about jobs and food and how to feed so many people on so little money and Tommy doesn't give a flying fuck.

The trapdoor is in the corner of the kitchen, right above it is the beam that Tommy has found himself crouching on, using a hand to keep himself steady just in case.

The trap door that used to be covered in creates. Underneath it should have a ramp and then a tunnel and then the vault door that's the start of the key to everything.

Hopefully.

While Tommy doesn't feel *great* about ruining all of these lovely people's nice days, maybe Elysium should've fucking considered not ruining Tommy's day.

Tommy takes a deep breath.

He needs to get some *fucking* answers because surely Elysium wouldn't…

In one move he pulls his arms up, the trapdoor on the floor rips completely off its hinges. It makes a loud clanging noise.

Tommy steps off the edge of the beam he's found refuge on.

At the last minute he catches himself, he lands on a ramp.

One of his arms flies up, the trapdoor lands haphazardly back over the gap in the ground. Not secured by any means but good enough.

Ah, he remembers this.

He also remembers several guns being pointed at him right now.

Sure enough Tommy whirls around and there is a gun pointing in his direction.

Tommy doesn't hesitate to throw his arms out in front of him. Red energy wraps around the gun and jerks it out of the person's grip, the gun goes skittering down into the dark tunnel that Tommy remembers so well.

Tommy rips the person in all-black towards him, before twisting their energy so they're hanging upside down just above the floor.

"Woah," the person says, "hi."

“Do you know sign language?” Tommy signs.

The person nods.

Awesome.

A+ for inclusivity.

“I need to talk to someone in charge.”

“Uh—” the person says, “‘fraid I can’t do that. They’re all kinda busy right now.”

That’s fine.

He’s— himself, he can make someone get an audience with him.

Tommy drops them, and they hit the ground in a way that is a bit funny. Tommy probably shouldn’t laugh about it, but also… it is quite funny.

He steps down the ramp.

Further away from the entrance it gets dark. Last time there were small lights lining either side of the tunnel, this time there’s nothing.

Tommy moves to the side of the tunnel, trailing his hand along the edge of the wall and feeling all the bumps and dents of the brick underneath his fingers.

Tommy doesn’t need the lights anymore— the tunnel is completely pitch black this time. Which is… well, different from last time. The sparks of powers that fly off of Tommy’s hands illuminate the way well enough.

If his memory serves him correctly at the end of this hall are two guards— both highly armoured and probably incredibly competent. Semi-automatic guns *feels* right but Tommy’s memory around the whole incident is a little bit hazy.

Neither of those things should be problems though.

Tommy does crouch as he walks further and further into the tunnel, just in case people start shooting at head height. He keeps himself pressed to the far wall, hand trailing along it so he doesn’t get lost.

Sure enough, far enough down the tunnel is the vault door that Tommy recognises.

It has two lights on it, shining down on two guards standing by it. Both guards are indeed heavily armoured. They’re wearing riot gear almost, with thick helmets and chest plates. They have repurposed riot shields leaning against the wall, these shields have been painted over with a purple flower.

Tommy keeps to the wall, taking a deep breath.

He could probably talk his way around this like a reasonable person— but if the guard stationed further up on the hallway was right… there's no entry into Reddings today.

Unfortunately for these two guards, Tommy needs entry into Reddings.

When Tommy needs their attention he straightens up, rolling his shoulders back as he sets off a little light in his hands.

“You seeing that?” one of the guards says.

Tommy keeps walking forwards.

“Oi!” one of the guards yells at him, “you can’t be here—”

The noise of the guards' helmets clanking together echoes throughout the tunnel. One of them go limp and the other reaches for the gun still in their hand—

So Tommy does what any responsible person would and clanks them together again.

He drops both guards onto the ground relatively gently, flicking his hand to put them both in the recovery position just in case— he doesn’t want either of them to choke on their own vomit, that would be awkward.

Sparks fly off his hands, and Tommy shakes one of his hands.

“Stop that.”

His hand does not stop that.

“That’s so fucking unhelpful right now.”

He shakes his hand once more and the sparks dissipate off of it, falling onto the ground with no effect.

Tommy steps over one of the unconscious guards before reaching the vault door. He knows there’s a keypad at the side, but because of the dark he runs his hands along the door trying to figure out where it is.

Eventually he finds it, flipping up the protective cover that they have over it.

5-7-4-7-8-3-6.

He knew he remembered that for some reason, and here is the reason.

The door starts whirring as mechanisms lock out of place.

He takes a step back away from the vault door as it whirs. Tommy is going to bet every dollar in his bank account that these are some trigger happy people and Tommy doesn’t really fancy being shot in the face.

Bringing up a shield feels good, a spiral of energy centering around a certain point. All it does is get objects stuck in it, pulled into the force of it so it doesn't go past and hit Tommy.

But it feels good, it feels like some of the ache in his fingers and hands is relieved, if only for a second. His entire body has been aching since he woke up, like there's something pushing on the inside of his flesh trying to rip itself out of Tommy.

It feels like much needed relief for a pain Tommy didn't even know he was experiencing.

This is what his powers were meant for— shields and weapons and things that take more effort than clunking two people's heads together.

The vault door swings open, and the familiar noise of gunfire echoes throughout the tunnel around him. Bullets fly away from the energy shield that Tommy has set up and embed in the concrete and brick of the tunnel behind him.

Tommy is able to make out a rather large group of people, most of which are holding guns— a quick gut feeling says about ten people. Which— when Tommy was at his peak that would've been easy.

It seems a lot more difficult now than it did a few months ago.

Ten people is a lot of people and he doesn't want to fight them.

"STOP!" someone yells.

Tommy doesn't recognise the voice, because *lord forbid* he gets nice things and allies when he needs them.

"Theseus?" someone else says.

Tommy waves.

It feels polite, all things considered.

It's been so long since Tommy's had to be careful with his voice— but he's come here as… himself. It's already risky to come into Reddings as Theseus—

"Uh— does anyone know sign language?"

The group all look relatively young— Tommy's age or a little bit older, their clothes are wet and sticking to their clothes. Most of them have hair that is in various states of drying, a few still have water droplets running down their face.

"Yeah, I do," someone from the group sighs, they look the least rained on out of everyone.

"Need to talk to a leader," Tommy signs.

"Uh…" the least-rained on person says, "yeah— they're all kinda a bit busy now… I mean the guards would've told you that but uh—" their eyes dart to the two unconscious guards,

“yeah— I’ll uh— get right on that. Can someone take him to the… conference room, I guess? They’re in a meeting right now but I’m sure someone can leave early— uh follow Scarlet.”

A woman who looks unimpressed with being given that job rolls her eyes, but otherwise whirls around and heads off towards one of the buildings.

Reddings is just as pretty as it has been, but Tommy’s head is still swimming. Not even the plants and greenery can calm him down. He’s walked into what essentially may be the lion's den and may be being led into a potential trap.

Still, he follows after the woman he was told to follow.

They enter one of the buildings, before climbing up a set of stairs.

The room he’s brought to is relatively normal looking, there’s a large table in the middle with a map of Logstedchire on it. It points out all the various zoning areas and a lot of the important things. There are ‘X’s everywhere that seem to indicate… something Elysium related.

Maybe their community projects? It looks like there is an ‘X’ around where Elysium is.

There’s a window outlooking some places in Reddings, from here Tommy can see the plants hanging from the sides of buildings and the people walking along various mismatched scaffolding. There’s a group of teenagers laying on a very dangerous looking rope bridge. All of them are wearing black and purple.

He glances around the room again, apart from the table there really isn’t a lot in the room. There’s a couple of chairs that have been pushed to the other side of the room. There’s no doors coming off of this area, just the door Tommy came in through.

If it wasn’t for the window it wouldn’t be a bad place to trap someone.

The longer Tommy stands there, the more the terror is rising in his stomach. His head is spinning and everything happened today too quickly— someone only tried to kill him a couple of hours ago and Tommy hasn’t even gotten a chance to think about that or talk about that because Purpled is in danger and no one knows where he is but— maybe Elysium knows.

If they don’t know— then what— then what does he do because—

“Tommy?”

Tommy feels every vein inside of his body freeze up, every thought in his head immediately leaves it. Ice feels his entire body.

And like that, it clicks.

That’s who would allow that to happen.

That’s the only person in Logstedchire who would authorise a kill like that.

A kill specifically designed to hurt someone else— to hurt him.

Purpled's dead.

The voice that raised him— the voice that left him. The voice that protected him and it didn't even matter that it *did* protect Tommy because he left. He left and he's back and did he come back and *not even tell Tommy?*

He slowly, slowly turns his head towards the voice he recognises.

Deo's wide eyes are staring back at him.

- - -

The stairs don't have cameras— which is why Aimsey is currently wheezing, hands on their knees as they gasp for air. Aimsey is a fit person, do not get that twisted— they've been learning combat from *Techno* there's no other option but to be fit.

Still, climbing stairs is their weakness.

Sniff stands against the wall, arms crossed and generally looking unimpressed.

"Think about it—" Aimsey wheezes, "if someone killed Sam then Nelson-Jones wouldn't have to discipline him. Why was Sam purposefully in a room far away from everything?"

Sniff frowns, "that feels like a rather big thing to gamble on."

"He takes pleasure in thinking he knows everything about everyone," Aimsey wheezes for breath, deciding to fall onto their knees mostly for the dramatics. They lean their head against one of the steps, it feels nice.

"Is that why you stopped me? You didn't want to play into his plan."

"I just wanted you to think about it, I'd never stop you," Aimsey sighs, "I hate stairs."

"They're just not this difficult to climb."

"They are! They are! It's a terrible building design."

"Cut the bullshit. The fuck do you need me for?" Techno's voice booms through the stairwell.

Aimsey stops where they are in the stairwell as Sniff does too.

Both of their eyes follow up to the start of a giant vent above the staircase they're standing on. They're pretty high up in the building, the SBI floor is pretty high up all things considered.

They can… hear into Nelson-Jones's office?

That would be the only thing that makes sense— right? Unless Techno is yelling at someone random but Nelson-Jones *just* told them that he was meeting with Techno. And— well—

William Nelson-Jones is unimpressed with Techno on a good day.

There's murmuring coming down through the vent, Aimsey can't make out many words after Techno's yelling but tones seem to be quite intense.

There are no cameras in the stairwells— Aimsey knows this because that's what's causing trouble in this whole Sam and Tommy thing again. It's Techno's word against Sam's, and Sam is the more trusted one by most of the public.

Aimsey reaches up their hand to pull the cover off of the vent before they can stop themselves.

It clatters on the steps.

Sniff's mouth falls open, "Aimsey—"

"I want to hear what they're saying," Aimsey hisses back, "this feels important— you don't have to come with but—"

"Of course I'm going," Sniff looks genuinely offended.

"I'm gonna use my powers—"

"Duh."

Aimsey just nods, before focusing his energy again. Xe lines up with the vent, before using a tendril of red flickering energy to wrap around Sniff's middle. Sniff grimaces as they feel the energy take hold.

Then Sniff flies up towards the vent, hands catching around the edge as they land in the vent with a loud thump against the metal.

The both of them are silent for a long moment, Sniff looking into the vent trying to hear any noise. After a few moments Sniff looks over their shoulder, giving Aimsey a *very* helpful shrug gesture.

With an amount of ease only allowed by Aimsey's recent training with her powers, Aimsey connects a line between themself and the vent. Then pulls on the line so she goes flying towards the vent.

They manage to throw their powers underneath their feet, silencing their landing as they drop onto their hands and knees. For good measure Aimsey turns over their shoulder, pulling the vent opening back onto the opening, once again silencing it with their powers.

Sniff looks impressed for a moment, before jerking their head towards the source of the noise.

So the pair of them start moving.

Aimsey uses little bursts of power to silent themselves as they crawl through the unnaturally large vents, Aimsey doesn't really understand *why* the vents are so big, but Aimsey isn't going to question that right now.

Small slithers of energy silence where their hands and knees hit the metal vent.

As they crawl it gets louder and louder— it's still muffled but the voices quickly identify themselves as Techno and William Nelson-Jones.

Sniff stops, before sliding along the vent as they point. Aimsey follows their finger, there's a rather quickly moving fan but most importantly the gaps between the fan reveal an office. While Aimsey can't make out all of the details it's a relatively decent sized office with a desk and several bookshelves.

The most noticeable thing though is Techno sitting on the other side of the desk, arms crossed — Aimsey can't see more of his expression, but they can only imagine how unpleasant it is.

"—back in our favour," Nelson-Jones says, "I allow you and your trainees the routes in Logstedchire that you have been doing anyway— do not think those got by me."

Aimsey glances at Sniff with wide eyes— while logically Aimsey knew that people knew about that. It's different when it's the head of the hero committee telling Techno about it. Sniff leans forwards slightly, a confused expression on their face.

"And the incident earlier today will be entirely forgiven— Tommy will be allowed as much time as he needs off work and Sam will be disciplined publicly and appropriately."

Aimsey's mouth actually falls open— is he actually saying he'll prosecute Sam? Between the conversation in the private wing and this—

"Limit the curfews," Techno says, "get rid of Pandora's. Build more community housing and centres in Logstedchire— the issue is not with heroes and the fact half of them can't eat and when they steal so they can eat that's the only time the police or heroes act in Logstedchire. While the businesses with their shoddy business practices go free."

"Sorry," he says, "that's just not within our scope… I'll pass the message onto President Jenkins."

"I'm sure you have no sway in policy."

"I'm not an elected official, I have no sway in policy."

Aimsey watches through the spinning fan as Techno picks up a mug on the table and smashes it onto the ground next to him. The noise reverberates through the metal vents and Aimsey can only just look at Sniff with wide eyes.

"Sorry. Piglin thing. Have no control over it."

Aimsey has only known Techno as a relatively calm person.

“Just as I have no sway in government, I’m sure.”

Techno shoves away from the chair, turning so that for a moment Aimsey and Sniff can see his face and it’s nothing but pure unbridled anger. The shards of mug crunch on the floor as Techno walks out of their view.

“It seems you haven’t made a decision on my offer, Techno.”

“You already know my choice, William,” Techno says, his voice full of nothing but rage, “you wouldn’t have brought up Tommy if you didn’t.”

“Ah,” Nelson-Jones laughs, “it only took nearly a decade but finally you’re learning how things operate here.”

The door slams shut loud enough to shake the room.

Nelson-Jones goes back to scribbling something in a notebook, Sniff shuffles closer to the whirring fan until they’re basically sitting right next to it, each spin sending their hair flying all around the place.

They’re not quite directly above Nelson-Jones, they’re more to the side of the room, but Sniff’s brows furrow as they look down, evidently to read what he’s writing. Their face twists in confusion and they look back at Aimsey with wild eyes.

Sniff does a series of hand movements Aimsey can’t understand.

“I don’t know sign language,” Aimsey signs back, in sign language.

Sniff gives them a flat look, then starts drawing letters in the air. ‘J-E-N-K-I-N-S’.

Which makes Aimsey’s eyes go a little wide, and they shuffle forwards too, so it’s the both of them cramped in that one specific area. Aimsey moves to lay on her stomach, and each spin of the fan in front of them makes his hair go flying.

Reaching back, Aimsey props themselves on their elbows as they tie their hair in a relatively low ponytail on the back of their head.

They peer down at what Nelson-Jones is writing, squinting a little to get a better view of it.

Dearest Arthur,

I am afraid we may have underestimated the contempt in Logstedchire after all of these years. I do not think this is an issue we can just fix immediately and trying to do so might undo everything we’ve worked for.

I believe I have bought us some time, but I implore you to remove the curfews and the ID checks for people leaving the district, they haven’t allowed us to find any vigilante anyway. I sense if we are not careful this could easily spiral out of control.

There’s the noise of a door creaking open.

The notebook slams shut and Nelson-Jones looks up.

Walking into the room with large strides is a man that Aimsey truly has never seen before. He is relatively tall, bald, wearing a light brown duster coat that flies out around him as he walks towards Nelson-Jones, his coat is completely drenched and he wipes droplets of water out of his eyes.

“Ah, Fit…” Nelson-Jones says, “I was wondering when you’d find your way back. How did your mission go?”

Aimsey knows that name— from— somewhere…

“Completed,” Fit says, “the others?”

Nelson-Jones’s face screws up, “ah— less well than yours went it appears. Sam has been rather hurt.”

Huh.

Sam attacked Tommy—

“Sam?” Fit repeats slowly, “you sent fucking Sam after someone instead of literally anyone else more trained— no fucking wonder he’s in hospital, his main strength isn’t combat.”

“You will find, Fit, that is not your concern. I concern myself with Sam and his failures, and you should be concerning yourself with your own potential failures. In my experience vigilantes tend to be a little like cockroaches… it was a small miracle we got Haurire and Latrodectus.”

The best way Aimsey can discover the state of their brain is similar to how it would be if a siren was whirring in their head. Haurire and Latrodectus— the two names on the report they found *on* Nelson-Jones’s files.

Vigilantes. They’re talking about Sam being in hospital and vigilantes at the same time— Sam is in hospital because he attacked Tommy what the fuck do vigilantes have to do with it?

And Aimsey then in their heart knows that Fit knew them— Haurire and Latrodectus, Jaiden and Roier.

They know this because Fit’s entire body seizes up for a split second. There is nothing but rage and contempt on Fit’s face. Aimsey has never seen pure hatred on someone’s face the way they do on Fit’s face in that moment.

“Are you sure Purpled is dead?”

Aimsey’s brain is still shot out of the back of his head from the Haurire and Latrodectus information. *Purpled?*

This conversation is moving so quickly that it feels like Aimsey has been punched in the throat multiple times in quick succession.

Sniff's mouth falls open and Aimsey's does the same.

What the fuck does that mean about Tommy then?

Aimsey fumbles for their phone, unable to do much more than hit record and point it— the fan might override all the noise but it's worth a shot at least. The fan isn't *that* loud all things considered.

Please let this work.

Fit sighs, "he wasn't breathing when I left."

Nelson-Jones hums, "I notice your spectacular dodging of the question."

"I can't confirm either way. I left when I confirmed he wasn't breathing. Someone may have found him, I'm not sure."

"There's a five minute window you had to stay for and you couldn't even do that?"

"Your heroes were swarming the fucking place," Fit snaps, "I'm sorry— I didn't want to get arrested for attempted murder on your orders. Seems like even if that kid survives— somehow. I'm the only one who got *close* to completing my task."

Nelson-Jones scowls, "I had not accounted for Techno in my plans."

Fit snorts, "kid's still walking circles around you."

Nelson-Jones scowls, "it will be fine… we are changing directions. Let's hope for your sake Purpled is dead. You know what I did to the person who was hired to kill you."

It genuinely feels like for a split second Aimsey's brain breaks out of their head because *what the fuck does that mean?*

Aimsey's head is spinning and they don't know half of it.

Sniff taps their shoulder.

Aimsey glances up at them.

Sniff points at the notebook on the desk, then does what Aimsey can only describe as a 'yoinking' motion, then wiggles their fingers.

Aimsey is not happy to admit that they know exactly what Sniff is asking.

They spend too much time together.

"I'm not too afraid of that happening," Fit replies, because *oh yeah* they're still talking, "if you wanna lose your best information guy that's fine. Cellbit would have to work less 'cause there would be no one else to look after the kids."

Sitting up, Aimsey leans their back against one side of the vent, bracing with their feet on the other side. The fan is still whirring right next to their ear, but that shouldn't really be an issue.

The vent is on the side closest to the notebook, all Aimsey would really have to do is wait until their attention is on the other side of the room. Which… could be a bit difficult, and it's not like Aimsey can make something happen on the other side of the room because Aimsey can't *see* it.

Or…

Does Aimsey need to see something to use their powers?

Nelson-Jones hums, "your oldest is twelve, right? Perhaps it's time to get him tested for powers, he's nearly coming to the age where training starts."

There's never been a moment where Aimsey has *had* to use their powers without seeing the thing they're trying to move. Aimsey could also pop their head out of the vent if that doesn't work, no one in their right mind is looking up this high.

"You wouldn't fuckin' dare," Fit says, his voice once again dripping with contempt, "that wasn't part of the deal."

Trying to use their powers when they can't *see* what they're trying to move is risky but doable.

Aimsey tries to envision what the other side of the room looks like, they try to envision the continuation of bookshelves that they can see. They try to imagine a book— just one book, hanging precariously between falling and staying upright.

And all Aimsey has to do is give it a little tug.

Their powers latch onto something, and across a side of the room that Aimsey can't see something clatters to the ground.

Nelson-Jones jumps, Fit's head swivels around towards it.

Aimsey feels their powers latch onto the notebook again and they jerk it up into the air as quickly as they can. Their other hand flies out to momentarily stop the fan, which they do before pulling the notebook in.

Sniff immediately takes it off them, putting it on the vent floor (do vents have floors?) and pulling out their phone. They flick to the first page before starting to take photos of everything.

Aimsey looks out into the room again.

"That book," Nelson-Jones mutters, "it's always falling over."

"Maybe you should put it somewhere with more structural integrity," Fit deadpans.

Sniff flicks through the noteback, eyes glancing up every few seconds just in case.

Aimsey shuffles as close as they can get without actually getting their hair or ears cut off. They hold their breath as Fit walks out of their view. Nelson-Jones glances to the side, head tilting a little bit when his notebook isn't there.

So Aimsey, like a smart person, shoves Sniff backwards and shuffles so Aimsey can't see into the room for a moment. Then Aimsey scoots back.

"They're still talking about the importance of the Logstedchire Four," Nelson-Jones says, eyes still on where his notebook used to be, before his eyes flicker back to Fit, "a lot of the headlines are quite reminiscent of the ones you and your little group used to get."

"Yeah— and remember the work you put into making Ordo Theoritas disappear," Fit says, "that's not going to work this time. All of L'Manberg knows the Logstedchire Four."

"I know, don't think I can't get creative in my old age."

"You said it, not me," Fit mutters, finally walking back into view.

Ordo Theoritas— it's a name that twinges something in Aimsey's brain, something long ago when she was a child. Something about whispered words in the kitchen between her mother and a friend.

It doesn't do much more than that, only twinging a memory that Aimsey can feel sliding out of their grasp. Something about whispering and the way the kitchen light was flickering that night.

Sniff taps Aimsey on the shoulder, and Aimsey whirls around to look at them.

They hand the notebook back to Aimsey, then do some wiggly finger motions that Aimsey once again understands and hates.

Aimsey gets the notebook past the fan, with a flick of their finger, before skimming it across the ceiling as they move it into position to slowly lower down. Too fast will mean everyone's peripheral sees it.

They raise another hand to try and knock something over on the side of the room they can't see again—

Fit's eyes glance up.

For one terrifying second there is a moment where Aimsey and Fit make eye contact.

Aimsey can't breathe because just like that everything has been undone— all of the work that she's put into everything is over. Fit's going to say something and then Anemoi is done— Guqqie and Ranboo remain otherwise—

As quickly as it happens Fit's eyes snap back towards Nelson-Jones.

Fit moves so he's standing on the other side of the table, forcing Nelson-Jones to turn his head away from where the notebook had been.

Is… Fit actually *helping* ?

"So what's your plan? Sam fucked this beyond belief." Fit asks.

Gently Aimsey manages to lower the notebook next to the desk, like someone accidentally knocked it off.

Nelson-Jones sighs, leaning back in his seat, "it is quite easy to get people to turn on you… it would not be difficult against the Logstedchire Four, with all of their— unsavoury connections. I also now know Theseus's identity and that alone is… very interesting indeed."

How else would… Nelson-Jones know that?

Sam attacked Tommy. Fit was sent to attack Purpled.

The moment it hits feels like a lightning bolt to the brain, Aimsey's mouth opens and they have to cover their mouth with both hands to stop them from screaming. He looks at Sniff with wide eyes.

Sniff, who missed half of the conversation to take photos looks baffled.

Tommy is Theseus—

It's the only thing that makes *sense* with the information they've been given about who Fit was sent after— the conversations about vigilantes and Sam attacking Tommy. Tommy isn't Aurelian or Slime.

That leaves Theseus and Purpled, and Purpled was someone that Fit was sent to take care of.

Tommy has to be Theseus.

And Aimsey is honestly… kind of offended someone that fucking scrawny has so much power over everything. Over William Nelson-Jones, over Logstedchire, over everyone including Anemoi.

Maybe they're wrong—

But Aimsey is… pretty sure they're not.

And that alone is terrifying.

With Aimsey's powers still muffling their noises creating silence, Sniff and Aimsey shuffle out of the vents and they try not to pass out from the *HOLY SHIT* of the entire situation.

- - -

A lot of Tommy's childhood is hazy at best.

One thing that has stuck in Tommy's mind, like a nail in a piece of wood that he keeps standing on is a conversation he had with Deo. He was quite young, maybe eleven or so, and turns out being brought up in a gang has its consequences on you.

Tommy had asked something about manipulating people.

Deo had said something about not needing to manipulate *the person* , just people *close* to the person , because that's normally the thing that hurts the most.

Maybe Deo didn't know he was Theseus—

It doesn't matter any fucking more because his best friend is dead and it was to get at him and no matter what Tommy does he drags the people he loves into things like this— and there's nothing he can ever fucking do about it—

He hasn't been this fucking angry in a long time, the kind of anger that is already clawing at everything he is and ever has been. He's so fucking angry and he thinks it might kill him, every vein in his body tries to tear out of it.

Because his best friend is dead and it's probably his fucking fault. It always is, isn't it?

Tommy's fist swings into Deo's face.

Deo grunts, stumbling back, holding the side of his face and breathing heavily.

"I don't want to hurt you," Deo breathes out, "please don't make me hurt you."

And he needs Deo to hurt— because he needs Deo to die or understand half of the agony Tommy's in. It feels like his heart is going to break out of his chest, his heart is thumping in his ears and throat, he can't think.

Deo needs to hurt— and he needs to feel like his heart is snapping inside of his body and he needs to *understand* the pain that he's put Tommy through. He needs to understand how nothing will ever be the same again and he needs to hurt—

"Did you say that to Purpled too?" Tommy whispers.

And Tommy truly didn't think all of those fucking years ago this would be how it went— with Deo back in L'Manberg and working for Elysium and Deo being the one who put a fucking hit on Purpled because it would hurt him.

Every single vein in his body is on fire.

Sparks are flying off of him, and Tommy can see the way that underneath the black sleeves of his hoodie he's glowing red. He can feel the power in him coursing through— electricity running through his entire body.

The buzzing that normally whispers at the back of his head is now screaming at him, Tommy can barely hear anything over the static in his head as he stares at Deo.

Deo who abandoned him— Deo who came back and didn't fucking *tell Tommy* . Deo who killed his best friend. Deo who is at the centre of nearly every bad thing that's ever happened to Tommy.

His powers curl out of his hands in an arc of lightning and sparks and red.

Tommy barely controls it— it feels more like he's finally given permission for his powers to do whatever they want. He doesn't want to reign them in like he has been doing. He knows they're ripping themselves out of his body and it hurts and he knows that it hurts—

But he barely feels like he's in his own body now, it feels like he's nothing more than a vessel. Nothing more than a weapon.

Tommy dives for Deo.

The pair of them hit the floor in a tangle of limbs and future bruises, and Tommy immediately gets to work. The first punch is protected by Tommy's glove, the second one is still protected by his gloves.

Blood flies from Deo's mouth on the third punch.

Tommy doesn't stop.

His knuckles split at some point, he can feel the pain shoot through his hand but he keeps driving his fist into the side of Deo's face.

Eventually it seems Deo realises that he is being punched in the face repeatedly, and his brain kicks into gear. Deo grunts with pain, bringing his arm up to protect his face while his other hand whirls around to grab Tommy by the shoulder of his hoodie and haul him to the side.

Tommy whirls around, throwing a hand out. His powers latch onto Deo, who is scrambling for the gun by his side. He tugs Deo towards him, and Deo goes skidding against the carpet towards him.

He swings again. Deo jerks his head out of the way, so Tommy's fist slams into Deo's shoulder. Deo grunts, swinging his elbow into Tommy's nose.

The goggles crack underneath it, and pain shoots through Tommy's face. He doesn't think his nose is broken but— *fuck* it hurts. In the bleariness of pain, Tommy throws his hands out, letting whatever energy wants to release itself from his hands go—

Red energy wraps around Deo's torso and sends him flying across the room.

The plaster wall cracks outwards like glass from where Deo hit as the dull thump of Deo's body slamming into the wall echoes out through the room.

Tommy winces at the sound.

Deo slid down the wall, landing on his feet, before stumbling onto his hands and knees. He groans with pain, slowly looking up at Tommy, with hair in his face and the red mark on his

cheek quickly darkening.

Deo takes a deep, tired breath, “what do you actually want, Tommy?”

“Funny isn’t it,” Tommy snarls, “whenever I’m falling apart— it’s almost always your fault.”

Deo’s face does something that Tommy doesn’t know how to decode anymore. Then he just shakes his head, “it’s not—”

“You sold blue to them,” every word feels like poison out of his mouth, every word is something he’s been longing to say for *years* , every word is both healing and feels like it’s tearing Tommy’s heart in two. “And— that’s what made me… well… this. Isn’t it?”

“I didn’t know they experimented on their kid,” Deo chokes out. “If I had I would have shot your mother in the head the first time I met her. She said— volunteers, I didn’t know, Tommy.”

The second worst part is Tommy believes him.

The worst part is that it doesn’t matter if Deo knew or not— he’s still the reason, he’s still the cause as to *why* they had access to blue. Deo was the first of many people to enable what happened to Tommy when he was a child.

Tommy shrugs one shoulder, “fact of the matter, *Cyrus Amadeo.* You ruined my life in… so, so, *so* , many ways. Do you fucking know what I went through after you *abandoned me* ? How the remaining threads of my childhood unravelled as I learnt to pay bills and look after my friends and try to *scrape* enough money together to live. How my dreams died and were crushed underneath me because I had to survive? Did you even fucking think of any of that before you walked away—”

Deo watches, looking like he’s about to cry.

Deo does not get to shed these tears on Tommy’s behalf, not anymore.

“It wasn’t supposed to go like that—” Deo starts.

“Well that’s how it fucking went!” Tommy screams.

And it is— Tommy had no fucking stability after Deo left. Nothing— no money, only some forms of ID that could prove he existed. No money— he had to search for jobs and jobs and keep getting jobs to try and make things work, and to keep Tubbo in school while Tommy dropped out of *actual* school to do most of it online.

Deo left.

Tommy had to pick up the pieces with shaking, unsure hands.

Tommy’s hands don’t shake anymore as his powers grip around Deo, forcing him into a sitting position against the wall.

He revels in the feeling that comes from the look of panic on Deo's face as he realises that he's not in control— he hasn't ever *been* in control in this conversation. Tommy could snap his fingers and Deo would drop dead.

The feeling of Deo's fear—

It feels good— it feels like the Kinoko Library and winning fights against heroes and it feels like when he nearly killed the old fighting ring leader and it feels like the first few seconds after he killed his mum when he didn't know *what* had happened, but he knew that she wasn't able to hurt him anymore.

It feels like what he's meant to be.

Tommy holds Deo in place, pinning his shoulders to the wall and his calves against the carpeted floor. Deo barely gets enough freedom of movement to breathe, his breathing gets more and more laboured and panicked the longer that Tommy holds it.

He lets up some of the pressure and Deo wheezes for breath.

Deo's eyes bore into Tommy. It's the first time Deo's looked at him with horror and—

It shatters something inside of Tommy's chest, the thing that is still young and yearns to be loved. That little fracture that forms in Tommy's heart is going to stay there, it might feel healed— but Tommy knows something in his world has shifted in this very moment.

The man who raised him is afraid of him.

Even, somehow, despite having known Tommy as a weak child who craved affection and attention— Deo is still scared of him in that moment. Deo has known him inside out and still… he's afraid of Tommy.

It still hurts.

It's what Tommy wanted… but it still aches.

And this is still the person who would've called the order to shoot Purpled— this might be the person who *did* shoot Purpled. Deo always hated outsourcing the dirty work to someone who wasn't Luke or Bitzel. Why would this be any different?

"Did you know I was Theseus?" Tommy asks, because he wants to give Deo one last chance. Maybe he didn't know— maybe he didn't know he was dragging Tommy into all of this— maybe Tommy won't have to kill Deo, maybe he can walk away right now and everything will be okay—

Deo's mouth quirks up into a smile.

And like that Tommy already knows.

"Of course," Deo's laughter is a mixture of pride and grief, "I'm the one who taught you sign language, Tommy. Even if I wasn't— I'd recognise you anywhere."

“Huh,” Tommy says. He says that because there’s no other way to express the sheer rage that rises in his body, there’s no word that can articulate the blinding cold that takes over his entire body and the dull acceptance that Deo isn’t getting out of this alive.

Deo knew.

He knew and he *fucking did it anyway.*

Tommy can feel his powers course through him so intensely it’s painful, like every limb in his body is being tugged on just slightly out of its socket. Everything burns the way the freezing cold does, numbing and painful and freezing and warm all at the same time.

“And you killed him?” Tommy whispers, every word feels like ice in his mouth, “And you— you knew this would hurt me and you still fucking did it?”

There’s a moment of pure, unfiltered confusion on Deo’s face.

Then Tommy slams Deo’s head into the wall.

The plaster wall cracks underneath the weight of it, and Deo cries out in pain as he tries to bring up an arm to shield his head— but both arms are pinned by Deo’s side. Deo isn’t moving anywhere nor is he lessening the pain of this.

It’s not even half the pain Tommy is in right now— knowing Purpled is dead and it’s Tommy’s fault and *Deo* of all people did it. Everything aches, like Tommy’s fucking soul is getting ripped apart by everything that’s happened.

So he slams Deo’s head into the wall.

Again. And again.

And again.

Tommy doesn’t know how many times he does it—

All he knows is that when he stops there is blood splattered all over the plaster, and Deo isn’t moving anymore.

His eyes are closed— and he slumps forwards as soon as Tommy’s powers release him.

Tommy stares for a few moments, chest heaving up and down as he stares at the deep red stain on the wall. Everything is still, there’s no more fighting or yelling— and Tommy’s powers are no longer buzzing in his skin.

His chest heaves as he looks at Deo. The back of his head is a bloodied mess, it doesn’t look like there’s any bone exposed. Deo is still breathing— he’s still alive, and Tommy *knows* he should finish it.

He knows that there’s no coming back from this anyway— Elysium killed Purpled and Tommy can’t allow Elysium to exist like that. All he needs to do is kill Deo, the person who

allowed it to happen— the actual person to blame.

He can't.

As Tommy moves closer he knows he can't— he knows that he's not strong enough to do what he should. He crouches down by Deo, his breathing is wheezy but even, and Tommy knows he could stop that.

It would almost be like falling asleep, Tommy could stop his heart or— turn off his brain, or a thousand other things with his powers. He could make it painless and he could get his revenge and all of it would be over.

And he can't.

This is the person who killed Purpled.

This is also the person who loved Tommy when he was six and thought he was unloveable— this is also the person who watched Barbie movies with him and this is someone Tommy can't bring himself to kill.

No matter what they've done.

Deo groans, eyes flickering open but only half there— his eyes seem unfocused and not quite here. They still manage to lock onto Tommy, and somehow— despite it all— Deo's expression softens.

Tommy's heart breaks in his chest.

"If you're smart you're not going to reach for your gun," Tommy keeps his voice as even as he can, he can feel the start of a wobble at the end though. He feels like crying, there's a lump in his throat and talking is difficult and—

Deo is just looking at him, without fear or anger— just looking at Tommy the way he used to when Tommy was very small. When Tommy was very small he struggled to articulate his thoughts— or ask for things. Deo would just wait for him, with the same expression as the one on Deo's face now.

Tommy wants to curl up into a ball and sob.

"Why did you kill Purpled— why did you order to kill Purpled?"

He tries to sound older— but he still sounds like the scared little kid that Deo took in. He sounds, so fucking afraid and even he can hear it in his voice—

His entire body is shaking.

"Kill Purpled?" Deo repeats, his speech is hazy and jumbled , "m' only orders were t'keep you outta this—"

"What?" Tommy whispers.

“You really think—”

Deo forces himself to look up at Tommy again.

“You think there’s a world where I betray you?” Deo laughs, “you think there’s a world where I don’t do everything I can to keep you out of this shit show? To have either of those you have to have a world where I don’t love you… and sorry to break the news, kid, this isn’t one of those.”

Tommy takes a step back, “you’re lying to me.”

“About what? Loving you?”

“You can’t say you love me and abandon me, you can’t say you loved me… and have done this.”

“Didn’t fuckin’ do shit,” Deo mutters, “Purpled wasn’t even at the Heroes Hall attack, why would we wanna piss you off? You really think I’m not tryin’ to look out for you? Wha’ happened to Purpled?”

“I don’t…” Tommy crosses his arm, “I think he was attacked at an Elysium attack— I have nothing else but a couple of photos with a flower carved into the building behind him.”

“Huh,” Deo blinks at Tommy a few times, “sounds like what happened to that kid I bought in.”

And like that— Tommy’s world shatters for the millionth time today.

“The— the what?”

“Kid. Shot a couple of times, brought him back to the hospital. Hannah freaked out about it— dunno why really, she wouldn’t say anythin’ about it.”

He’s alive. He’s alive. He’s alive. He’s fucking alive—

Deo saved him? Of all the people in the world to save Purpled it was— Deo? That doesn’t make any fucking sense, what would Elysium get out of that— what would *Deo* get out of that. If Purpled wasn’t in his Purpled gear and was just a random teenager—

It makes no sense.

“You… saved him?” Tommy whispers, “why?”

“Why?” Deo repeats, “why would I— help an injured teenager?”

“Yeah— why?”

Deo stares at Tommy for a few long moments, “not everything Elysium does is to benefit somehow later on— sometimes we just do things because they’re the right thing to do. Kid was hurt, wasn’t gonna just let ‘im die.”

“He’s… alive?” Tommy whispers.

Deo just looks at him, expression still confused and fuzzy, he nods once— then pauses like he’s thinking, before nodding again.

“Where? Is there a medical wing or—”

Deo nods.

The window shatters with the flick of a hand and a frenzy of red light.

Tommy heads straight towards the window overlooking Reddings. It’s largely quiet, the alleyways and lane down the middle are mostly empty.

He steps over the shattered glass, and the glass cracks underneath his boots. His head is screaming at him— Tommy isn’t even sure *what* his head is screaming at him, it just sounds like busy static in his head.

Because Purpled is alive—

Somehow, despite it all and despite what Tommy thought and despite the fact that stuff like this never *fucking happens to him* . Purpled is alive, and Tommy feels like for the first time in an hour he can breathe correctly.

He’d barely comprehended a world that Purpled didn’t exist in, and now that’s been turned back on it’s head and Tommy can barely fucking think—

There’s a noise behind him, and Tommy’s head whips around.

Standing in the doorway is Bad, Bad has a hand propped on the doorway as he struggles to breathe. His eyes land on Tommy and then trail over to Deo and the bloodied mess behind his head.

Bad makes a noise of horror, before hurrying next to Deo and landing on the carpet next to him.

“He’s fine,” Tommy says.

“You’re— you’re *glowing?* ”

“I guess. He has a concussion, he should be fine without a healer. He’s losing a lot of blood but heads do bleed a lot. Where’s the medical area?”

Bad just stares at him for a few moments, before his eyes dart back to Deo. Bad says something to Deo that Tommy can’t hear. Deo shakes his head, Bad looks up at Tommy with wide eyes.

“Medical area?”

“It’s— right down the laneway— at the end of the laneway.”

“Excellent, thank you.”

And with that Tommy hops out of the window, Bad yells something after him but Tommy doesn’t care to hear it.

The feeling of falling is becoming familiar again— nearly comforting just for a split second.

Just before he hits the ground, he pushes his hands against the air, like he’s pushing himself up off the ground. Tommy lands on his feet gently, before letting out a deep breath and looking around him.

Sure enough, there still aren’t many people around. The people who *were* here have largely cleared out, there are a couple of people looking at him still, but they all seem to know better than annoying Tommy.

Tommy squares his shoulders and turns right.

He can feel eyes on him, he also knows that no one is going to try anything right now. He’s aware of the glowing red light breaking through his hoodie even more than he was— he has no way of seeing, or really knowing, but he’s pretty sure his eyes are glowing red through the goggles.

His footsteps pound on the cobbled path beneath him— he’s not quite running, but it’s a near thing as his heart pounds in the base of his throat. Everything feels fuzzy and weird— Purpled is alive?

That untrusting thing in him can’t break it— maybe he’s not— maybe Deo was lying to him, maybe Tommy is about to walk into a trap. But *Purpled might be alive,* and even with a slither of hope it feels like Tommy can… *be* again.

At the end of the alleyway is the door that Bad talked about. The door isn’t particularly unique from the dozens Tommy passed to get here. The only thing of note on it is a red cross sloppily painted over it— which Tommy thinks is a violation of the Geneva Convention—

Tommy takes a deep breath before opening the door as quietly as he can. The wooden door creaks, and Tommy steps into the room, eyes scanning for potential threats.

He’s in a long room lined with hospital beds. There are no windows, only the slightly flickering lights above provide any light. The room is washed in the sickly yellow of the artificial lighting, the white of the beds stained yellow by the lights.

His eyes scan over the entire room, looking for Purpled or *anyone* to point him in the right direction—

In a bed in the corner of the room, Tommy sees a flash of blond hair.

His heart immediately drops in his chest, and Tommy stumbles down the rows of beds, eyes locked onto the person laying in the bed. He stumbles into one of the beds that stick out more than the others—

And Tommy would recognise the hair anywhere, even bloodied and damp and generally a mess.

It's Purpled—

He's alive— he's actually fucking alive—

There are bandages and bandaids and an IV, but Tommy can barely focus on any of those details because tears immediately start falling from his eyes, getting caught in the goggles and steadily filling them up.

And Tommy is so many things, he's Theseus and he's the child of Cassandra and Seth Sygrove and he's terrified and he's ready to fight anyone who tries to fucking stand in his way. And there's a cut on his forehead and his footsteps are sluggish at best.

But right now he's a kid— and his best friend is alive.

The noise that comes from Tommy is a sob, something that comes from the back of his throat as he staggers over to the side of the bed.

He rips his mask and tear soaked goggles off his face, dropping them on the ground as he lands on his knees next to the bed.

For a moment he can do nothing but just look at his friend— his chest is rising and falling slowly. One side of his face is almost entirely bandaged, there's a bandage peeking out from his shirt where his shoulder meets his neck. There's a bandage slapped against the side of Purpled's head.

Purpled looks like shit.

But he's breathing.

That alone is what makes Tommy start losing it, that alone is what makes Tommy curl over the bed, his forehead resting on the blanket next to Purpled and start crying.

The tears start slowly and then they're pouring.

With relief that Purpled is alive— with mourning about everything that Tommy was supposed to be and can never be— crying because Theseus is back and Tommy can't step away this time. Crying because Deo was here this entire time and said nothing—

"I couldn't survive losing you too—" Tommy whispers, "not after Tubbo— not—"

Any words he hopes to say get cut off by another heaving sob, as more tears roll down his face. He wipes his eyes with the back of his arm, he tries to pull himself together, if only for a few moments before another heaving sob rips itself out of his throat.

Tommy doesn't know how long he sits there, chin on the mattress while he just watches Purpled breathe— every time there's a moment in breath Tommy thinks that it'll be the last

one Purpled has. Every time Purpled pauses his breathing for even a few seconds, Tommy thinks of a thousand worlds where Purpled is dead in all of them.

He takes a deep breath, he's not actively sobbing anymore, but every time he breathes or looks at Purpled or has a thought he feels like he's on the edge, ready to tumble into more tears and just cry forever.

Purpled's alive— everything is going to be okay because Purpled is alive.

Footsteps against the floor make him spin. Tommy holds one hand out in front of him, ready to blast—

Standing at the doorway, gun raised, is Hannah. Her eyes are calm as she has the gun trained on Tommy. There's something fixed in her expression that Tommy recognises from his own eyes in the mirror.

"Are you going to attack me?" Hannah takes a step into the room and closes the door behind her.

"No," Tommy mutters, "no— you're fine."

"And Deo wasn't?" Hannah returns, voice icey, "neither were those guards you knocked out — they all have pretty bad concussions. Deo needs stitches now."

"Deo could drop dead tomorrow and I'd find it hard to care," Tommy doesn't know if he actually means it, he thinks he does. He thinks he means it— if he does or not is a whole other complicated subject— he doesn't know anymore. A day ago Tommy would say of course he cared— a day ago Tommy didn't know that Deo had abandoned him.

Hannah looks skeptical, but lowers her gun, "I think we need to talk."

Tommy's eyes dart back to Purpled. "I think you're right."

Chapter End Notes

So... sorry about baiting the Purpled death.

I promise he's the only death I'm gonna bait I'll actually kill other people.

Basically, Purpled was supposed to die when I first started writing him wayyyy back, but then sadly he became me. Then I felt wrong about killing a character who is me. Lots of Purpled's complicated, messy emotions are very genuinely just me reflecting on various things in my life. While him dying could've been a satisfying end to his arc (finally being comfortable in loving and having been loved.) I like where it's actually going to end far more!

lead

Chapter Summary

> “Theseus is back,” Aimsey says, and they just know it.
>
> “What?” Techno’s head whips around to look out the window.
>
> Sniff makes a noise of surprise, running up to the window and pressing both of his hands against it. They stare out the window, taking in the buildings and apartments with red fabric and flags flying from them now. With people on the streets in red and a cacophony of colours.

or, our pieces are in place, it's time to start this game

Chapter Notes

> HELLO. Welcome to. The start of the political games, which is something I've been very very excited to write. I hope you all enjoy my emotional support evil lesbian daughter (Kiera Kingston)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The room is relatively quiet as Kiera clicks her nails against the desk in front of her. She knows that it’s getting on Luca’s nerves by the way that every bone in his body seems to tense up a little bit more every time she does it.

Still, she’s not going to stop it until someone says something.

This truly is an interesting evening for both Eden and herself— this has never happened before. Never before have they been called to the meeting room quite like this— Kiera was getting her nails done and had to stop that immediately to be.

Only one of her hands is done. Her nail lady is very polite about Kiera’s line of work and won’t mind— it is inconvenient for everyone involved though.

It is the first time she’s been called for an emergency meeting, and more shockingly it’s the first time that William isn’t the first one to the meeting. Which means Kiera is free to click her nails on the table annoyingly.

She also has a milkshake she got on the way here— hoping to be fashionably late, instead she was here before the person who called the meeting.

With nothing better to do, Kiera's eyes skim across the other people in the room, sitting at this annoying table that she's learnt to hate. There is not nearly enough leg room under this table for her— it's not her fault that all the men here are shorter than her.

Everyone but William is here, and Kiera glances over at all the other fellow members of the hero committee.

Luca Bennington, the thorn in Kiera's side since before she had even joined the committee— he gave her mother trouble when she was on the committee. He's supposed to be in charge of the accounts, the treasurer. Normally he just gives Nelson-Jones all the money he wants and everyone else is left to suffer.

Spencer Lee. A smart man, a little younger than Nelson-Jones and has known him since they were both kids— apparently. He's clever and good at what he does, which is mostly connections to various media outlets. All of the PR work that is done in the hero tower goes through him at some point— whether the people working below him know it or not.

Eden Aphelion, the one closest to Kiera in age, but he's still in his mid-thirties. His kids are cute though. Kiera gets along with his daughters well enough (or buys them expensive loud gifts for them with the purpose of annoying their father.) Kiera wouldn't call Eden a friend by any means, but occasionally they go to each other's houses for dinner. His kids know Kiera by name and whoever Kiera is dating at the time normally knows about the role Eden plays in Kiera's life.

Eden is supposed to be in charge of the hero aspect of it all— making sure they have gear and hiring them and making sure they can train effectively.

Of course, none of them matter if William wants to override.

And that is when William walks into the room.

William looks the worst he ever has— Kiera wasn't around for the crisis ten years ago, so maybe he just looks this awful when everything is in crisis. He looks exhausted, and Kiera doesn't feel particularly good or bad about that fact.

Kiera keeps her eyes on William, still drinking her milkshake.

"Is he dead?" William asks.

Kiera's head snaps towards William, "who?"

"The boy? The boy that I specifically sent him to you to have him killed quietly."

Ah. Tubbo.

"Oh, yes," Kiera leans back in her seat taking a long sip out of her drink. It's pretty good— she probably should've tipped more than she did, "he won't be a problem for you anymore."

All of those words are technically true. She also knows that Tubbo Underscore is so much more useful alive than dead. She also knows that Tubbo Underscore still being alive secures

her more power— she has something William wants.

Which… may not come in useful considering how old he is and the fact he looks like he's going to crawl into a ditch and die any day now.

Everyone knows who William wants his role to go too if he retires or gets genuinely too old and just keels over and dies. Kiera also knows that everyone is gunning for the role that William will leave behind.

It's adorable for William to assume that they'll just *let* Sam take his place.

Still, no one has said otherwise because that could cause problems for everyone. If William truly, genuinely wants to believe that they'll just let Sam have the job they all secretly want— then that's on him and also a problem for Sam when William dies.

Kiera props her chin on her hand as she glances around everyone else. Luca and Eden both look a little unnerved, while Spencer is doing the same thing Kiera is doing and looking around at everyone else.

"Why have you called us here, William?" Spencer asks, and Kiera resists the urge to roll her eyes, *bootlicker.*

William takes a deep breath, he sounds the most tired Kiera has ever heard him. "I imagine Theseus will only cause more problems going forwards. From now on we are going to set our resources to removing the Logstedchire Four… quietly."

"Were they… not already going towards that?" Eden says very slowly.

"We are doubling our efforts," William says, "we need them gone. Kiera— how are the cells in Pandora going?"

"Uh— Theseus's is pretty much done," Kiera says, "can I ask— what's the point in not just killing them? Kill them when they're in their civilian identities and then nothing will come of that. Capturing them *as* themselves will cause a bunch of trouble… just find out who they are and shoot them in the head, I dunno."

William frowns, "that is the approach we are trying to take— there are circumstances which make aspects of that incredibly difficult. Finding their identities has also proven to be incredibly difficult… Slime has remained evading our efforts for years."

Luca is quiet for a long moment, "wasn't Slime in Ordo Theoritas?"

"He was," William says.

"And we currently have members of Ordo Theoritas in Pandora's," Luca's eyes dart to Kiera, "who I would almost guarantee knows his identity. Surely there would be… ways to extract the information from them."

Kiera frowns, leaning back in her seat.

She doesn't know much about the people from Ordo Theoritas currently in Pandora's. She does know that they gave her mother a lot of strife when Kiera had been a teenager. The three who are in Pandora's mostly keep to themselves—

One of them might be Tubbo Underscore's cellmate, which may cause some problems for her in the future if she's not careful about this.

"I thought we *tried* to get that information out of them years ago," Eden says, "they wouldn't give up any information on Clóvis or Maelstrom… let *alone* Slime."

William folds his hands together, humming slightly as he quickly gets the expression of someone thinking about something incredibly unpleasant. Everyone watches him for a few moments before Spencer sighs.

"There must be a way to find their identities."

"We have the confirmed identity of one," William says.

"What?" everyone snaps, several voices overlap each other as various people yell about what they weren't told and if they know one of their identities why even bother with all of this?

"Theseus's identity," William says.

"Who?"

"Thomas Underscore."

Kiera immediately pats herself on the back for *not* killing Tubbo Underscore.

That could've been a really big problem for her if she had in fact done that. She doesn't know if they're brothers or Thomas is a parent or *what* but she's very glad that she didn't shoot someone with Theseus's last name in the head.

Good work.

Spencer's mouth falls entirely open, "my best guy is Theseus?"

"He's your best guy?"

"Yes! Every hero he works for magically has their approval rating double overnight— why did it have to be him? He managed to make Zephyrus and Osteon massively popular you know how hard that is to do with hero trainees—"

"Spencer," William snaps.

Spencer closes his mouth, but otherwise very much looks like a man in mourning.

"Currently his identity as Thomas Underscore is what has stopped us from moving along further. There was an attempt to kill him earlier today which was thwarted by Techno—"

“Techno’s fucking wrapped up in this too?” Kiera yells without really meaning to.

William nods, “he cares for Thomas a lot— which is also proving to be a problem regarding us moving forwards with getting rid of Theseus. We have had issues keeping him… under control before, currently he is able to be kept in line because of Thomas. Removing that factor and—”

“He will kill us all?”

“Maybe,” William relents, “we are playing a very difficult game with two men who are significantly stronger than us and can only be put in line through their connections— now if we disrupt those connections there would be nothing stopping them from using their full power against us.”

Against me, is what William doesn’t say, but everyone hears it anyway.

“We need to run campaigns against the Logstedchire Four,” Spencer says, “to at least weaken their sway over the general population— we may not be able to change how they’re perceived in Logstedchire but if they don’t have nation-wide support like they do now then they might not gain enough power to *do* anything.”

Their voices fade into nothing but drabble and murmuring as Kiera lets herself think— actually think. She doesn’t know if Elysium or Theseus or Logstedchire are going to win this — but the others are talking like it’s impossible for them to even get *close* to winning.

That means that if they do win… they lose all the power they have.

They’re so willing to fight against any change, that when the change happens they won’t have a seat at the table.

Kiera… does not want that. She also doesn’t want to tell these people the start of plans forming in her head, she doesn’t *want* most of them to come out of this with their power intact. She hates most of them— and the one person who she doesn’t hate, Eden, she doesn’t want to have to share whatever of the crumbling power structures are going to be handed to them.

“What do you think, Kiera?” William says.

Kiera looks up from the point at her desk she’s been staring at, “pardon?”

“You’re quiet— why?”

Because you’re all idiots and fucking underestimating Logstedchire and the forces at play in Logstedchire and I want to fill the power vacuum you inevitably cause.

Instead, Kiera just gives her shortest smile towards William, “just worried about all of this, that’s all.”

William doesn’t believe her, Kiera *knows* that he doesn’t believe her. He’s aware of this too. Kiera doesn’t need to be believed, she just needs to put up the perception of it… which is

something she's never particularly struggled with.

He won't call her out for it now, and Kiera can go back to her own thoughts.

William has known Kiera since before she was born, that is the cost when your mother and your boss were close friends. Of course… Annette Kingston was also William Nelson-Jones' boss before being his friend. Either way, there was a time that felt so far away where Kiera had an 'Uncle William' and would be excited whenever William would be at her increasingly elaborate birthday parties.

And Kiera cares for William, of course she does. She cares for herself more— William has had his time, and he's been largely successful until now. They need to change methods, they've *needed* to change methods for the past two decades or so.

Maybe Kiera would try and protect William from some of the crossfire if she had to.

She doesn't want to.

Her eyes glance over to Eden who is listening to whatever Spencer and Luca are saying. His pencil is tapping against the table as he nods.

Kiera may not be able to help William with the fire about to blow up in his face, he's too prominent, he's been too in charge for too long and few people have questioned him.

She thinks she can help Eden.

Lucia Aphelion and Lilliana Aphelion both probably deserve to grow up with a father who is around— Jacqueline Aphelion probably wants her husband around while their children grow up and long after it.

The rest keep talking about restriction and PR releases and reframing but Kiera barely hears any of it— none of it really matters anymore. She's going to try her own thing, and she's going to pull Eden into it whether he likes it or not— this is the only way they'll get out of this with power and influence. William, Spencer and Luca can talk all they want to but this has been a cycle of them allowing this to happen then trying to shut it down when it gets dangerous. Something has to change.

When the meeting ends everyone goes to rush out, having been assigned various tasks. When Kiera goes to stand, grabbing her milkshake, William raises a hand at her and shakes his head.

Kiera really has no other choice but to stop and listen.

"Is everything alright, Kiera?" William asks, he looks actually concerned and Kiera feels bad for a few seconds.

"Sorry," Kiera says mostly on reflex. "I uh— having a fight with the girl I'm dating right now, sorry if I'm out of it. Just worried about a lot of things." She tries to give William a smile, the sort with the intent to be comforting but just makes the other person worry.

William gives a small sympathetic smile, he pats Kiera's arm, the way he used to do when she was a kid. It gives a little bit of comfort despite anything, "well, I may be old— but I have had incredibly disastrous relationships. If you want to talk about it I'm only a phone call away."

Kiera's mouth falls open for a few seconds. "You've had relationships?"

William laughs, something sad tinting the edge of it, "yes, I was young once. It'll work out, Kiera, the Theseus problem and whatever problems you're having with… Sally is it?"

Kiera has never felt more fucking embarrassed in her life, "uh— no, we split it off. Uh, it's Calliope now."

"Well, whatever it is with Calliope will work out. Things work out. You're gonna be just fine."

Kiera watches William leave the room, leaving her the only one standing in the meeting room.

Kiera knows that various people have gone over to their desks to start work— Kiera hasn't been assigned much to do that she wasn't already doing. Oversee the research in Pandora's, oversee Pandora's and the cells being built for the Logstedchire Four—

For a second she almost feels bad for William, one of the most important adult figures in her life— more important than Kiera's actual father. She takes a deep breath before running a hand down her face.

William would never agree to what she has planned, William would fire her if she even *suggested* it. He would never let the girl he watched grow up do half the things Kiera is probably going to do.

She can't save William from himself.

She can, however, save herself and Eden from the consequences of William's own actions.

Kiera finds Eden after the meeting. Eden is quickly packing up an array of papers, brown hair falling in his face as he wipes it away with the back of his hand before shovelling more papers into his bag.

"Good evening, Mister Aphelion."

Eden whirls around, a question on his face.

Kiera grabs his forearm and pulls him in closer, it would nearly be a hug if they weren't who they were, "the boy William asked me to kill was Tubbo Underscore. He's still alive and working for me."

Eden pulls back, eyes wide, "why would you do that?"

“William is getting sloppy,” Kiera hisses back, “exceptionally sloppy for who he is. Tubbo hadn’t even had charges laid against him— and he has quite the temper, I think Tubbo said something that *scared* William.”

Eden’s entire face twists, “some teenager from Logstedchire was able to scare William?”

“It seems only teenagers from Logstedchire scare William,” Kiera says gently, “Theseus is a teenager— we’re pretty certain Purpled is a teenager. I think these people see writing on the wall that William is only just starting to see.”

“And what’s the writing on the wall?”

“For the first time in William’s life this is something he can’t erase— not like he did with Ordo Theoritas, not like he did for the other vigilante groups before that. Everyone knows the Logstedchire Four, you can’t just— *get rid of them* . We’ll have to negotiate with them eventually.”

“We will not,” Eden snaps, “we are not negotiating with an unelected force of *vigilantes.* ”

“Who elected us?” Kiera shoots back, “who elected you, Eden Aphelion? To me it sounds like Logstedchire is starting to play our game back at us— and that scares William. The only way to stop it before we lose any power is to negotiate now. I think William is so scared because these people are better at playing the game than he is— Elysium, Theseus. They’re going to win.”

Eden’s jaw sets, “Ordo Theoritas didn’t win.”

Kiera shrugs, “it’s different this time. One thing you should know about Logstedchire is they’re stubborn. They’re going to win, it’s just a matter of time until they win— and we should be planning for what happens when they do win so we can keep our positions and privileges we worked for.”

Kiera claps Eden on the shoulder.

“And also… if you don’t tell William about Tubbo Underscore the blame is also on your back if I get caught. Also tell Jackie and the girls I said hi— and I will be there at Lucia’s tea party. I might just be a little late.”

Eden just stares at her as Kiera throws her coat over her shoulder and heads to the elevator.

The thing about standing around while your world has been turned on your head is that you have to be remarkably relaxed about it. Aimsey has to act like everything is fine and also normal meanwhile their head is spinning and their heart is racing.

Fit, the assassin, (maybe? Aimsey doesn’t really know.) Clearly saw her, and… Fit didn’t do anything about it. Fit in fact, *helped,* brought up Ordo Theoritas by name, brought up so much incriminating evidence and provided context that wasn’t needed unless people were listening in on the conversation.

And Aimsey doesn't know how to even start unpacking that, all they can think is *HOLY SHIT I KNOW WHO THESEUS IS. HOLY SHIT I NOW HAVE DIRECT ACCESS TO SOMEONE WHO KNOWS ABOUT ORDO THEORITAS AND HAS MORE INCRIMINATING EVIDENCE ON NELSON-JONES.* Which they understand is not practical, but holy fuck.

Sniff is acting about the same, leg bouncing up and down as she glances at her phone every five seconds. She doesn't flip it over to see the photos she got, just like how Aimsey isn't looking at his own phone either.

Aimsey has so much to say, but trusts themselves to say none of it right now. Aimsey never knows who's listening, and they don't want to risk it. About Fit and about Tommy and Sniff didn't even *see* what happened with Fit because they were too far in the vent.

So much to say, and Aimsey has to wait until they get home to say any of it.

The floor that Aimsey and Sniff have found shelter on (the upper finance floor, the SBI floor is closed because of the whole investigation thing going on right now.) Is quite nice, no one questions Sniff and Aimsey being there— or the fact both of them look keyed up like they're about to explode.

A few people who pass give them strange looks, but word gets around the tower quickly and everyone seems aware that Guqqie and Aimsey may have had the weirdest day in the history of— any day to ever day before.

Footsteps slam into the carpeted floor from the direction of the elevator, and Aimsey looks up from the bag of ground coffee they were inspecting that they had taken out of the kitchenette.

Techno is beyond in a fucking flurry at this point, half of his hair has come out of his ponytail and the other half is wisping around his face. His face is red, which is impressive considering how hard it is to get him to get slightly puffed while sparring.

His eyes immediately dart onto Aimsey and Sniff, and he heads straight towards them. "Have you seen Tommy or Daniel?"

"Uh—" Aimsey glances at Sniff.

Sniff shakes their head.

"I don't think I've seen them since— well Daniel and the being shot conversation and Tommy and the whole— being drugged thing. Why?"

Techno starts swearing rapidly under his breath, running his hands through his hair and removing more of it from the ponytail at the back of his head. He takes a moment to scream into his hands.

Then he whirls back around, heading back towards the elevator.

Aimsey grabs his arm, "wait one second— tell us how we can help!"

That makes Techno whip around, looking at Aimsey with confused eyes, “huh?”

“You’re trying to find two missing people and you are one person— that’s not practical, even slightly. What’s happening?”

Techno takes a deep breath, closing his eyes and trying to calm himself for just a second. “Someone matching Daniel’s description was found at the Heroes Hall attack— then the— presumed body went missing before Foolish could retrieve it. Tommy— well was in the hospital. I don’t— I don’t know where either of them could be or if they’re still alive.”

Aimsey nods.

Alright. Tommy is Theseus and Daniel is his best friend—

Who has been mysteriously hurt… by someone Aimsey doesn’t know. But the stories line up don’t they— if Daniel is Purpled? Purpled goes missing after an attempted (or perhaps successful assassination) and Daniel is missing at the same time after being attacked…

And Tommy, or Theseus, is gone from his hospital room.

Aimsey *could* say all of this, but he is sure that Techno already knows all of this. Techno knowing who Theseus is has become an accepted fact in the tower, if Daniel… is Purpled, then Techno will know for sure.

“Alright… have you tried calling him?”

“Phone was broken after Sam attacked,” Techno says. He runs a hand through his hair for what feels like the billionth time. “I just dunno where to look— Tommy snuck out of the hospital that’s probably the first lead…”

“Alright, so cameras are the first step.” Aimsey says. “They’ll only have the cameras in here but you can get access to ones if you need to track him. It’s just a matter of where do you think he’d go after… everything.”

Techno runs his hands through his hair, sighing deeply. “He wouldn’t have gone home— not while Daniel is still…” then Techno devolves into muttering more to himself than other people, pacing up and down.

Aimsey gives Sniff his best ‘yikes!’ look and Sniff returns it with a ‘yikes!’ look of their own. They both watch Techno pace around a little bit more as he mumbles things that Aimsey can only hear every second word of.

It’s not that they think their mentor is losing their mind… it’s more that he seems very close to a breaking point and Aimsey is terrified for other occupants of the hero tower (particularly for Sam’s already weak grasp on living). Aimsey will be fine if Techno does snap! It’s more… everyone else who will not be.

Techno stops pacing for a second, something akin to a realisation playing on his face as his mouth opens slightly. Then Techno’s shoulders sag, like the tension has been cut out of them and he sighs with something that’s nearly relief.

And… Aimsey doesn't *know* if now is the appropriate time to ask questions about the names that were on the November 16th Apartment Collapse deceased, but she also knows that there's not going to be a better time.

In fact, Techno's so distracted right now that he might forget Aimsey ever asked.

"Uh— Techno?"

"Yeah?"

"I have a question, but now might not be the right time…" which feels like an understatement considering how dishevelled Techno looks right now. While Aimsey has seen Techno look *stressed* before, this is a different thing entirely.

Techno looks a bit like he's going to rip all the hair out of his head.

Safe to say, he looks a bit fucking stressed.

"Huh?" he swivels around to look at Aimsey, several questions playing on his face. "Uh— go for it, can't be much fucking weirder than what I'm dealing with right now."

"Who were Latrodectus and Haurire?"

Techno's head whips around to look at Aimsey, eyes wide. "What do you mean?"

"It's just… a name I've heard," Aimsey says slowly. "I just thought they were heroes or something it's really not a big deal—"

"No, it's— it's fine," Techno rubs a hand down his face, "they were two vigilantes, they were with Ordo Theoritas back in the day… they fell off the map, I don't really know why. All of Ordo Theoritas fell off the map."

Aimsey's brain whirs.

Ordo Theoritas comes back up for what feels like the millionth time today, at this point they're lurking around after Aimsey and Sniff. Techno doesn't know that Latrodectus and Haurire are scribbled on a list about the November 16th Apartment Collapse. Techno doesn't know that they're dead— Aimsey thinks they're dead because of how Fit reacted to them being brought up.

Was Fit related to Ordo Theoritas somehow?

That's the only thing that makes sense, right—

"Aimsey?"

Their head snaps in Techno's direction.

"Are you okay?"

“Just… thinking,” Aimsey mutters.

They need to talk to Fit, Fit *knows* something about all of this. Ordo Theoritas wouldn’t have come up in the way it did if Fit *didn’t* know. Aimsey chews on their thumbnail, trying to really think about it all.

He’s aware of Sniff and Techno talking, vaguely, the same way that Aimsey is aware that they’re in their own head and probably need to get out of their own head and talk about the fact that Tommy is missing.

Aimsey cares about Tommy, and the kid who is Theseus being missing is worrying— but they care about this more. Ordo keeps coming up, in every conversation and discussion, there seems to be a mutual thread that runs back to Ordo Theoritas and Aimsey only knows one person they can even *try* and ask about this.

They know Fit is on side, at least enough to help cover Aimsey and not say anything when he saw her. So… simply enough, Aimsey *needs* to find Fit and they *need* to talk because in a way everything comes back to Ordo Theoritas.

The only thing that draws Aimsey out of their own head is a flicker of colour and movement outside.

Their head turns towards it.

Unfurled from a building across them is a large sheet of red fabric— it’s quite small considering how high above it the tower is, but it still catches Aimsey’s eye. It’s a similar red to their powers, a bit darker.

Aimsey takes a few steps towards the window, their footsteps ring in the room.

A few more bits of red fabric are unfurled, the way pride flags are during pride month. Aimsey can only stare at them as Sniff and Techno talk about what they can do behind them. Things they can do to find Tommy.

“Aims?” Sniff says.

Aimsey knows that exact shade of red, the shade of red that’s been seen in videos around the world—

It’s Theseus’s red.

Aimsey watches as people— so far away they look like ants, turn into a sea of red below on the streets around the hero tower.

“Theseus is back,” Aimsey says, and they just *know* it.

“What?” Techno’s head whips around to look out the window.

Sniff makes a noise of surprise, running up to the window and pressing both of his hands against it. They stare out the window, taking in the buildings and apartments with red fabric

and flags flying from them now. With people on the streets in red and a cacophony of colours that aren't just read.

Techno takes a few steps to see, his mouth falls open. "Fuck."

Aimsey turns to look at Techno.

The expression on his face is pure fucking terror, something that looks like it shouldn't even *be* on Techno's face.

Techno takes a few steps back, before turning on his heel and running towards the elevator. He slams his hands into the button, eyes glancing at the elevator. A few seconds pass before Techno mutters something under his breath.

He runs to the start of the stairwell instead, pushing the door open with his shoulder and starting to sprint down the stairs.

Aimsey has half the mind to follow after him— instead they stand at the window, watching the little red ants march towards the hero tower. Aimsey glances at Sniff, who still has their hands pressed against the window.

"We gotta tell Ran and Guqqie," Aimsey says.

"It's going to be chaotic here— imagine how it is in Logstedchire."

They both stare at each other because of the realisation, and then start immediately fumbling for their phones.

Fit shrugs off his jacket by the door, taking off his shoes before putting them next to the door carefully. Several shoes are thrown by the door, including the kid's sneakers.

Ramón is sitting just in front of the door, legs crossed beneath him as he holds a piece of paper in his hands.

"Hey kid."

"Fit!" Ramón holds up the piece of paper.

It's a pretty good drawing of Ramón, Em and Richas with Fit and Cellbit also drawn in, "my teacher thinks you and Cellbit are divorced!"

Fit just blinks at his darling son a few times, "pardon?"

"Well, I was explaining that Richas and Em have two dads and you're my dad but Cellbit isn't— I think she thinks I'm an affair child. Am I an affair child?"

Fit stares at his son for a few more seconds because *who* taught Ramón about affair children. Why has a teacher expressed that Ramón is an affair child? How is that the logical conclusion of three siblings who don't have all of the same parents.

Cellbit isn't even Richas's or Em's primary guardian

"Ramón… you're adopted."

Ramón frowns for a little bit as the tiny cogs in his brain try to figure out why that's relevant to the conversation, "what does that have to do with anything?"

Fit can *hear* Em cackling from the other room.

"It means I was not involved when you were born, I got you after you were born. You know what being adopted means. I've explained it."

In return he gets a slightly blank look from Ramón. Now Ramón is quite clever, and Fit has no clue what's going on his brain, but he knows that this topic of conversation is not one that is going to be very effective.

(Cellbit is also going to find this fucking hilarious when he gets home.)

"What else did you do at school today, Ramón?"

"We played heroes today!" Ramón says, throwing himself into Fit's arms, "I got to be Theseus again! I think next time I have to be Aurelian because Dapper wants a go at being Theseus, but that's okay she's also cool."

"Theseus, huh?" Fit ruffles Ramón's hair and Ramón shakes his head, trying to bat away Fit's hand without much success, "you really like being him, huh?"

Ramón nods his head.

"What are the other two rascals doing?"

Fit steps through the entryway to see the rest of his space. The kitchen is a disaster in the way it becomes after the kids grab their snacks home from school. Sitting on the couch Richas and Em have a bowl of popcorn between them.

Richas has his legs drawn up to his chest and Em is sprawled out on the couch like she owns it. Ramón's lego is scattered on the floor in front of the TV, along with the wrapper of what used to be a fruit snack of some description.

Now it's in his hair.

Fit sighs, dropping Ramón onto the floor in front of his siblings.

He glances at the TV and— they have the news on. More specifically it's on the breaking story at the Hall of Heroes or whatever the fuck it's called.

Richas looks up, "Fit… what's Elysium?"

Fit blinks at him a few times, "uh— that's a pretty big question, Richarlyson. It's not something that's super easy to answer."

Richas frowns, “no one tells me anything,” he crosses his arms and stares at the TV again.

“Just give me a moment, I’m trying to think of how to explain it in a way that won’t dumb it down. You’re all smart kids and I don’t want to speak down to any of you— Ramón stop chewing on your shirt.”

Ramón frowns but stops chewing on the collar of his shirt.

Fit isn’t sure how he’s supposed to explain radical groups to his two twelve year olds and his eight-year-old, but he also knows that someone has to and it might as well be Fit. He just… needs to figure out how to do it in a way that doesn’t insult their intelligence.

Instead Fit picks up some of the rubbish from the ground and heads to the kitchen to start to figure out how to deal with that entire thing, “Elysium is a little bit complicated to explain because what you think about them changes a lot depending on who you are.”

He starts stacking the dishes into the dishwasher.

“So… a hero might think Elysium is dangerous because they kill people, and that’s bad. But someone who’s maybe… had a friend die because of a hero might think that to get rid of the heroes some people might have to die.”

“What do you think?” Em asks.

“That’s a good question, Em,” Fit scowls at the bowl with cereal still in it from this morning. Yuck. “I think Elysium tells us that there’s something wrong with how things work now that needs to be changed.”

“Why?” Richas asks.

“Well… if things were nice people wouldn’t have to do all of this,” Fit shoves a dish into the dishwasher that probably shouldn’t go there and should wait until another load of dishes, “most people don’t *like* being violent. So clearly there is something that has a lot of people very upset at the heroes.”

“Why are people so upset with the heroes?” Em asks, “aren’t they the good guys?”

“It’s not that simple, Em,” Fit sighs, trying to close the dishwasher door and failing. He’s going to have to restack everything.

Fit sighs.

“A lot of people have been very, very hurt by heroes. Sometimes to stay in power you have to do not nice things— but you’d hope the people in power are doing nice things.”

Ramón sighs, huffing out a breath, “this is too complicated. I think everyone should just get along.”

“I can’t believe you’ve solved it Ramón,” Richas says, “all the issues could just be caused by getting along!”

“What do Elysium even want?” Em asks, “they just seem to be hurting people.”

“Elysium mainly wants an independent body that can investigate the heroes, and the disclosure of where taxpayer money is going. They also want a couple of people to be arrested for human rights violations and inciting violence. And for the government money that goes into looking after the heroes to go towards making things better in Logstedchire—and Kinoko.”

Em huffs, “that’s a lot of things.”

“It is.”

The kids fall into silence as they watch the TV. Fit knows he probably shouldn’t *let* them watch the news, but he also knows that an uninformed child is a stupid child. Richas and Em are going to be teenagers soon, and censoring things that they could very well run into one day seems pointless.

Ramón is younger, but he’s also clever and would be livid if he wasn’t allowed to know things that Em and Richas know. And Fit is not emotionally prepared to lose an argument to an eight-year-old because Ramón would do his research and win the argument.

The reporter’s voice is honestly good background noise. Fit is pretty sure the attack didn’t do that much actual damage apart from property damage. And property damage is such a non-issue, but Fit knows they’re going to get all prissy and annoying about it because *of course* they are.

“Fit?” Ramón calls out.

Fit doesn’t look from where he’s stacking the dishwasher, “yes, my boy?”

“What does— Elysium think killing people is going to do?”

“They killed people at the Hero Hall attack?” Fit looks up from the dishwasher.

“They found someone dead on the scene,” Richas adds, voice flat.

Fit takes a deep breath before managing to shove the final plate into the dishwasher, he stands up to look at them all.

Em, Richas and Ramón are now looking over the couch at him, Ramón tucking his chin over the back of the couch while Richas looks intrigued and Em is trying to look nonchalant but Fit raised the kid, he knows that she’s interested.

“How does killing people help?” Ramón asks, “it feels—”

“Like a lot of effort,” Em adds with a frown.

Fit presses the button to get the dishwasher going before humming, “it’s a little bit complicated. But normally people like this have tried all the lower effort options first. But, normally those efforts don’t get a lot of attention. And sometimes when someone is hurting

you— you gotta hurt them back. If someone is bullying you, sometimes you can punch them in the face once and they'll piss off. Sometimes you have to hit them back a couple of times."

"Are you telling us we can beat people up?" Ramón asks.

"If they start it, then yes."

The three of them start looking at each other, evil child intent in their eyes.

"This does *not* apply to your siblings," Fit points a spoon towards the three of them, "because I know you will find a loophole, you are not allowed to thwack your siblings all the time. If one of you *hit* the other, the other can hit back harder. Starting it does not include poking and being generally annoying."

Ramón and Em both frown, crossing their arms and sinking down so they're both facing the TV again.

But Richas is still looking at him, something contemplative in their face.

"Would you ever do it?" Richas asks.

Fit's eyes snap over to Richas.

Richas, who sometimes looks like Cellbit so much it's painful, is chewing on his thumbnail. His eyes have that same look that Cellbit gets when he is analysing something— the same look that Fit remembers from Cellbit when they were kids.

Richas is trying to read him for something now. Fit doesn't know *what* exactly. But Fit does know that his answer here matters.

"Do things like Elysium do?" Fit asks.

Richas nods his head. His eyes are still scanning Fit's expression, probably seeing every microexpression that Fit is doing. Fit takes a deep breath, meeting Richarlyson's eyes. Richas's eyes are dark brown, the same that Pac's were when they were young. There's something so earnest about the way Richas looks— even when watching everything in Fit's face that breaks his heart a little.

"I'd do so much worse than blow up a building if it meant you had an easier life."

I've done so much worse things with the hope you might have a better life. Is what Fit doesn't say. Maybe when they're older they can know the extent of everything… for now they're just kids.

"Why?" Em asks.

Fit moves around to sit on the couch next to Em, "because, you're my kids and I love you. I want you to have the best life possible. I want the world to be kind to you because you are all the most amazing kids I've ever met, and the world should see that too."

Em takes another bite of popcorn, before leaning against Fit's shoulder. She rests her head against his prosthetic arm and keeps her eyes on the TV as they talk about the person who died at the Heroes Hall.

"I'd blow up a building if it meant you had an easier life," Em whispers.

Fit wraps his arm around her, pulling her in for a better hug. Richas leans against his other arm, and Ramón who must be feeling left out jumps so he's laying across all of their laps, his head on his sister's lap, while also trying to kick Richas in the face with his feet.

Tommy's eyes flicker back to Purpled. Every bone in his body is screaming to fight, his veins feel like they're going to burst. Instead, Tommy takes a deep breath and tries to calm himself down.

Hannah isn't a threat, not really. She's a threat the same way someone walking down the street with a knife is, unthreatening until you don't expect it. Tommy isn't expecting a knife in the ribs but also he knows she could do it.

He relaxes his shoulders forcibly and Hannah examines Tommy for a long moment. He can feel her eyes reading his body language.

Hannah stays two steps into the room, still very close to the door. She looks at Tommy the way most people look at a loaded gun.

Tommy can't even blame her.

He feels like a loaded gun, and he doesn't know what he's pointed towards. He doesn't know if he even *cares* what direction he's pointed in. Tommy gives the shortest smile in the world before his eyes scan back over to Purpled.

Tommy hasn't given himself a lot of time to *look* at Purpled.

The right side of Purpled's face is almost entirely wrapped in a bandage, Tommy can't see much but he knows there's some sort of padding underneath it, because his cheek and jaw are sticking out more than they should. On the other side Tommy can see a bloodied bandage that spans from the bottom of Purpled's neck, down underneath the hospital gown he's wearing, maybe to his shoulder, maybe more.

There's a bandage wrapped around Purpled's head with padding bandages on the left side, same side as the shoulder wound. There are smaller scratches across the side of Purpled's face.

He slowly turns to look at Hannah, "what happened?"

"Shot five times," Hannah says. "Twice in the stomach, once in the shoulder— we think that severed a nerve. One grazed past his head, messy but fine… the other lodged between his upper and lower jaw. Tore through the side of his cheek."

"W— what?"

“Blew off the flesh of his cheek, you can see straight into his mouth.”

Underneath the bandages is some sort of fucking horror that Tommy doesn’t want to imagine. His face screws up slightly and he opens and closes his mouth a few times as he tries to get the image of it out of his head.

Purpled, with one side of his face carved through with a bullet with strips of flesh and gore and blood and teeth hanging out of the side of his mouth and in his mouth and—

Was he afraid?

Did he feel the bullet that lodged in his jaw?

“The bullet’s… still in there?”

Hannah’s mouth falls open slightly. “We do not have the medical supplies to get it out, and it has been like two hours— we’re waiting to transfer him somewhere safer. We’re also waiting for random vigilantes to not come into our hideout and beat up our leaders.”

“Your leaders should probably stop leaving kids behind and abandoning them for an organisation that has never done anything for them, huh?”

Hannah’s jaw clicks shut and her entire face screws up in anger.

Tommy can’t even bring himself to care. His eyes dart back towards Purpled, trying to remember every injury on Purpled’s body.

He’s still breathing. Purpled is still breathing, that’s something positive about this whole dark mess. Purpled is alive—

“Who would’ve done this?” Tommy asks. “If it wasn’t you—”

Hannah barks with laughter. “You seriously think Deo would *let* any of us do anything that would hurt you. You think *I* would let anyone do something that would hurt Purpled?”

Tommy grits his teeth. “I think you and Deo haven’t given either of us faith that you wouldn’t hurt us.”

“There are plenty of people who would want to hurt Purpled,” Hannah says, starting to walk across the room.

Tommy’s heart rate picks up, screaming in his throat as his entire body floods with adrenaline and the feeling of static. Tommy’s eyes draw to the gun in her hand.

“It’s the easiest way to get at you, you’re an important player in the game you’ve been trying to reject for months,” she gets closer and Tommy’s heart stays wildly beating in his chest. “And most importantly… Purpled fucked up a lot of very important things when he was a very young child.”

The look on his face must be one of sheer confusion. Hannah gives an incredibly short laugh, moving

She plonks herself down on the bed next to Purpled. The gun lays on the bed and Hannah sits on her hands. She looks at Purpled for a few moments before meeting Tommy's eyes again.

"How much do you know about Purpled's past?" Hannah asks.

"Uh— he was trained by some bitch to be an assassin, I guess," Tommy looks down at his feet, "Purpled doesn't like talking about it much. And I know despite it she never could make him kill anyone."

Hannah laughs, nodding a little bit, "he was always the gentlest out of us— he used to take care of these bugs that lived in the wall of the sleeping area. He'd give up his food for it and everything. I think he named them…"

"You grew up with him?" Tommy asks, and he doesn't know why the idea that Purpled didn't… spawn into the world seems so odd to him. Of course people knew Purpled when he was a child, every child knows *someone* when they're young.

But Purpled, even now, doesn't talk much about himself. He talks less about his past and everything Tommy knows is mostly inferred based on Purpled joking about things. And… turns out someone in Elysium grew up with Purpled.

It just seems odd.

With a sigh, Hannah leans back on the bed, hand tapping against the metal of the head of the bed. She glances back at Tommy. "I grew up with him— I think you knew that, I was trained by the same person Purpled was… I was quite good at killing people even when I was young. Still— Purpled was the reason we got out— he caused a distraction and we ran… I said I'd come back for him."

"And you didn't?"

"Not until it was too late," Hannah says, "he'd already saved himself. She fell out a window — or was pushed, I didn't really look into the details. I just knew Purpled was out and free and a teenager *somewhere* in L'Manberg. He was doing pretty well for himself— I left him alone."

Tommy just looks at her, "you didn't tell him you were back?"

"I think he knew," Hannah says, "when I did see him again he wanted nothing to do with me — which is fine, I get it. I went into Elysium before it had a name— Deo hadn't joined yet… went around looking for more secret child assassins with the help of Bad and— yeah."

"Did you find any?"

"Nah," Hannah reclines fully so she's laying on the bed, looking up at the ceiling, "it was just us it seems."

“So… someone just randomly kidnapped… how many children?”

“Four.”

Tommy’s entire face screws up. “Why?”

Tommy isn’t exactly a stranger to being poked and prodded at like you’re not a child— his first memories are him being treated as a guinea pig, not a child. The idea of just randomly stealing four kids and no one looking is… incomprehensible.

Who are their parents? Did all of them have shit parents— did whoever trained these people take kids who weren’t missed—

“Does *he* know why?” Hannah asks, “has he ever talked about why we were training as kids?”

“Uh— I don’t think so.”

“Huh,” Hannah’s face twists. “I thought that’s why he got a job at the hero tower.”

Tommy frowns, because he can’t even begin to think about the start of what that means. What would relate to Purpled’s childhood at the *hero tower* ?

Hannah turns her head so she’s looking at Tommy, “Nelson-Jones has— assassins and hitmen and death squads at his every call and beckon. I think we were training to be one of his— fucking assassins.”

“Huh?”

Hannah sighs, “like how he trains the heroes from when they’re young because they’re easier to manipulate. I think he was trying to do that with his assassins— with me and Purpled and Walli and everyone else. I think he wanted the perfect group of assassins— and… well most of us were *very* good at it, he would’ve gotten it if it wasn’t for Purpled.”

“Training… kids?”

“Isn’t that what he does anyway?” Hannah asks, “most of the heroes are kids when they start — the new recruits, Zephyrus and Osteon are exceptions, not the rule. And rumour has it that they’ve been having problems keeping them entirely under control— that’s why Nelson-Jones wants kids to train.”

“I—” Tommy stares at Purpled for a few long seconds.

Purpled, who was supposed to be a pawn in someone else’s games. Purpled who was supposed to be sacrificed to get closer to Theseus. Purpled who is so many things and Purpled who is breathing, chest moving in and out.

Tommy doesn’t move his eyes off of Purpled.

Purpled, who accidently saved all of them and stopped Nelson-Jones when he was a *child* just by being himself.

“She took mostly orphans,” Hannah explains. “Well… the ones of us who looked for our parents found out we were orphans, I’m assuming Purpled is too. I have an aunt though… she’s nice.”

“Why are you in L’Manberg instead of with your aunt?”

With that Hannah shifts on the bed, she screws up the side of her mouth a little bit before her face relaxes into something more neutral. The neutral expression is one that Tommy recognises from Purpled, it’s uncanny.

“Because I love this place, because no matter what I will never be able to relate to the people who haven’t lived here. The others are with my aunt— I can’t just sit by why more kids who could’ve been me suffer. I’m not gonna fail more kids…” her eyes flicker over to Purpled and her expression goes blank again. “Already failed one.”

Tommy snorts. “Seems to be a bit of that going around right now.”

Hannah stiffens, eyes staring down at her shoes for a few moments.

“It’s weird,” Hannah says, “some weird little boy who used to feed the bugs in the wall and didn’t know what school was ended up saving so many people. Who knows the amount of blood on our hands we’d have if he didn’t step in.”

Tommy chokes on the lump in his throat, only able to keep looking at Purpled. Purpled— who turns out saved more people than he could ever fathom from the violence of the heroes and *then* became a vigilante, just in case it wasn’t enough.

“Can— can you treat him here?”

“If you stop beating up Deo I reckon we can give it a shot.”

He bites his tongue, not able to talk about the anger in his chest that seems to rise and fall with his heartbeat at Deo. Hannah doesn’t care to hear it, and Tommy doesn’t care to tell it. He tries to calm down his anger but his anger is an ugly twisted thing that seems to rest in his throat and come out with every breath and word.

Deo betrayed him, in nearly every sense of the word.

Honestly, Tommy thinks his reaction was a little bit tame for someone who was left by Deo then all of Tommy’s dreams exploded in his face as he tried to make ends meet for himself and his friends. Then this entire time Deo was in L’Manberg and probably could’ve helped him out.

And then he thought Deo was behind the murder of his best friend— and his reaction considering *that* was quite tame all things fucking considered. Deo is still alive, that’s good enough.

“He doesn’t need to be transferred to a proper hospital?”

“He might,” Hannah says, “the jaw stuff might be above our capabilities. The bullet is basically lodged between his lower and upper jaw— they’re saying he won’t be able to talk or eat for a couple of weeks if he’s lucky.”

“He’s alive though,” Tommy whispers. “Nothing else matters, he’s alive.”

Going to L’Manberg for university is something that Guqqie is probably gonna find themselves regretting forever— not because she doesn’t love it, but because she *does* love L’Manberg. She doesn’t know if she can ever bring herself to go home when this clusterfuck of a country is beginning to engrave itself in her bones.

It’s not home, not quite yet.

But Guqqie knows this could be home— they miss their parents and siblings but also… it feels like something is starting to be built here. University is going well, Anemoi is going less well as is Guqqie’s employment prospects but that’s—

That’s fine.

Music blasts through Guqqie’s headphones as they lean their head against one of the poles on the train. She knows she shouldn’t and that the train is filthy, but Guqqie is so tired that they don’t even care. The train rumbles as people do various things.

There’s a woman across from her reading a book about as thick as a brick, there’s a man scrolling on his phone, there’s another man holding a bouquet of flowers who occasionally holds it up and his face breaks out into a wide smile.

The commute Guqqie did to Logstedchire now was— truthfully a little bit annoying, especially when she *just* had housing on campus. Turns out she was too politically active and they rescinded her scholarship almost completely.

This worked out for Guqqie though, they were closer to Aimsey, Ranboo and Sniff. She was now closer to Anemoi’s headquarters— which was where Ranboo, Aimsey and Sniff stayed anyway. Guqqie is half tempted to move into Schlatt’s giant empty house, but she also quite likes her own privacy.

Then someone shrieks, and Guqqie looks up from where their gaze has settled on her beat up pair of converses.

A relatively young girl— probably in high school, she’s in a uniform and probably bulging class. She holds her phone in one hand, other hand clasped over her mouth as she stares at her phone.

Several pairs of eyes land on her, and she looks up slightly sheepishly, “sorry—”

“Are you alright?” someone else says.

The girl nods, “uh— Theseus is back.”

The immediate chatter that goes through the chart is something Guqqie hasn’t seen before, people immediately start talking and looking at their phones and showing each other things on their phone.

Guqqie feels the train screech to a halt— at her stop.

She doesn’t have time to get her phone out of her pocket, as she darts off the train. Several people who normally get off at different stops trail behind her.

There’s normally a checkpoint at the exit, where invigilators are free to go through people’s stuff if they think they’re suspicious at all— especially because this trainline goes from Upper L’Manberg to Logstedchire— it’s the only one that does that.

This time… there’s no one there.

Guqqie runs up the steps, taking two at a time as they sprint to get up into the real world and see if it’s true— if Theseus is back. If Theseus is back how is Logstedchire reacting? How *can* they react? What does this mean politically— it means chaos, mostly, right?

Running onto the street, Guqqie throws her bag over her shoulder and pushes past several people.

The streets are filled, with young and old and everything in between. Some of them are holding bright red flags and banners. Some are wearing red, a few have red bows tied in their hair and are laughing and dancing around each other the way children do, despite most of them being adults. There are people in school uniforms from schools nearby who have obviously left, who are running through the streets.

There’s music playing in the street and people are laughing, throwing their heads with glee.

Not too far away is the smell of something being fried, and Guqqie’s eyes dance around the street to see a small group of people barbecuing various things and handing them out to anyone who walks past.

There was a mixture of visible hybrids, with horns and teeth and tails and bright yellow eyes and people without those traits. People were laughing and dancing and the streets had been turned into a massive party. Some of the shops along the road were completely open, handing out free food and leftovers.

Guqqie can’t do anything but stare at the streets of Logstedchire that she knows to be dull and dreary are now filled with life and laughter and music and things that often aren’t afforded to the people here.

They haven’t lived in Logstedchire for long— but even Guqqie knows in their fucking soul that… *this means something* . All the laughter and joy from people who are normally stubborn and stoic because they have to be… it means so much.

Theseus is back, and it seems Logstedchire has risen with him.

Guqqie fumbles for their phone, pulling it out of their pocket as people yell around them.

There's more laughter and more people wheeling out various barbecues and more conversations being had that are getting louder and louder.

The first thing Guqqie sees is no less than four missed calls from Aimsey, she quickly calls Aimsey back, holding the phone up to her ear.

It picks up on the first ring.

"Guqqie!" Aimsey says excitedly, "have you heard—"

"Yeah… yeah… I've heard," Guqqie says, staring at the people around her. She starts heading down the street, giving smiles to people who smile at her first. "Are you guys okay at the tower?"

"Today has been fucking crazy," Aimsey says, "I need you to do something for me, please, with uh— the files."

Guqqie nods, even though Aimsey can't see it.

"Look through employee records for someone named Fit," Aimsey says. "We've found a couple of references to him— I need an address, or something. I need a way to be able to contact him."

"An address?" Guqqie stumbles through a crowd of people, muttering apologies everytime they run into someone, "uh— I'm not— okay. Where's Ranboo, are they okay?"

"Sniff is on the phone to them," Aimsey says, "uh— I think they're being released from school early? We'll be there soon— things are chaotic up here, there's emergency meetings and who the fuck knows. They're acting like a nuke has been released into the city."

Guqqie is quiet for a long few moments, "a nuke kinda has been though…"

Aimsey just sighs, "yeah— okay— Sniff and I should be there in a couple hours, can you scan through everything you can?"

"Mhm." Guqqie takes a soft serve cone that is shoved into her hand, and she grins at the elderly woman who gives it to her, "thank you so much— I'll be there soon, if I don't keep getting handed things."

Aimsey laughs, a small but beautiful thing. "How are things in Logstedchire?"

Guqqie looks around the street, at the music that is now blaring through the streets, a mix of different songs that Guqqie has never heard before. There are people dancing around the speakers people have hauled out,

Food from shops is being given out, a few people are selling things, people are handing out red ribbons and a young boy presses one into Guqqie's hands.

“Good,” Guqqie says. “Things are— really good, a bit chaotic… but really good.”

There’s a moment of silence from Aimsey through the phone, and Guqqie can almost feel the smile through the phone. Guqqie finds themselves also grinning as they move through the streets towards Schlatt’s place.

“See you soon?” Aimsey says.

“Of course.”

Guqqie hangs up, putting her phone back into her pocket as she moves through the streets to Schlatt’s. They tie the ribbon around their hair— using it like a headband to contain the wispy parts of pink hair that has flown in front of their eyes and face.

Schlatt’s house is in a slightly nicer area of Logstedchire. It’s nothing incredibly fancy, but it’s two storeys and has a basement— which is more than most other places in Logstedchire. It’s an old house, with brick and white trimming around the doors and windows. Out the front are very nicely looked after hedges and flowers with a fancy driveway leading onto the road.

Guqqie hauls her bag over her shoulder as she rushes in.

She pushes through the foyer, heading towards the laundry room at the back of the house, which also has the stairs down into the basement that they’ve set up as their little base.

However, standing in his office, with the door open, is Schlatt.

The fact that Guqqie has had nothing to do with Schlatt is truly impressive. It used to be Tubbo, who was clearly close with Schlatt in the way only someone could be if they were raised by them. Now Ranboo or Aimsey do most of the talking to Schlatt.

Schlatt doesn’t look much different to the last time Guqqie saw him, his face is pinched in an expression that Guqqie doesn’t know how to identify. The grimace on his face alone makes Guqqie want to keep sprinting towards the basement.

Instead, she stands there for a few seconds, looking at Schlatt.

“I said what I fucking said I’m not funding you after what you did—” Schlatt yells into the phone. He turns to see Guqqie standing in the doorway. He presses a button on the phone, clearly hanging it up before shooting Guqqie a placating smile. “Afternoon.”

“Afternoon,” Guqqie replies, eyes darting down the hallway towards the laundry room. “Is everything alright?”

Schlatt grimaces at the phone in his hand like it’s personally wronged him. “Everything’s fucking dandy, you lot alright?”

“Fine,” Guqqie says, “Theseus is back.”

“Trust me, I’ve heard about it,” Schlatt says with an honestly foul expression on his face. He scowls at the phone again. “You lot gonna do something about it?”

“I reckon,” Guqqie says.

There’s a long moment of silence, as the both of them just look at each other.

“Listen Guqqie,” Schlatt says, crossing his arms. “You’re smarter than the others.”

Guqqie opens her mouth to immediately argue against it, because she’s *not* . She’s not Aimsey with their natural leadership skills or inherent kindness. They’re not Sniff with Sniff’s determination and drive. Guqqie isn’t Ranboo with their powers and quiet observational skills and frankly ridiculous connections.

And no one is Tubbo.

Schlatt shakes his head and Guqqie’s mouth closes with a click.

“You’re not smarter than them brain wise,” he taps the side of his head. “You’re smarter than them because you’re a realist. You’re smarter than them because I think deep, deep down you know this isn’t going to happen without someone getting hurt.”

Guqqie frowns.

“You’re like me,” Schlatt continues, “and because you’re like me I’m gonna tell you something real fucking important. Tubbo isn’t coming home without us pulling the same bullshit back on them.”

“What are you saying?” Guqqie narrows her eyebrows.

Schlatt sighs, “Theseus. Everything comes back to him. He could break Pandora’s open and still have time to go out for lunch if he wanted to. Make him want to. Force him to pop Pandora’s open if you want it open.”

Guqqie smiles. “Uh— we have a plan, I don’t think Aimsey would be too happy if I was gonna uproot that—”

“Aimsey is an idealist,” Schlatt says, “it’s an admirable trait, really. I respect that about them a lot, it’s not easy to be an idealist when everything is this fucked. Blackmail is not going to let Nelson-Jones let Tubbo go, Tubbo is too valuable of a bargaining chip. That’s assuming he’s not dead.”

Guqqie readjusts her bag on her shoulder. “Why haven’t you told Aimsey this? He would listen.”

“And you’ll listen more,” Schlatt responds, “and Aimsey will listen more to you than anyone else alive. Tell them or not, I don’t mind. Good things rarely happen to the people who wait to get handed them.”

Guqqie’s brain is whirring— and she knows immediately that she’s not going to betray Aimsey like this. Guqqie doesn’t even know *how* to utilise Theseus to get Tubbo out of jail, she’s never met Theseus. Still, there’s something about Schlatt’s words that are starting to ring true even in their own head.

The blackmail plan isn't going to work… Tubbo's too important. Them even *trying* to blackmail Nelson-Jones reveals their hands. He can just kill Tubbo because Tubbo is clearly important to this group.

Cracking Pandora's open before Nelson-Jones can react against Tubbo… it might be the only way out of this. Pandora's should have mountains and mountains of people who could speak against Nelson-Jones.

However, it is a crime to break people out of prison. Therefore nullifying any sway these people could have. It's the start of a plan though… just one that Guqqie has to start thinking about more…

No. Aimsey has a plan, and Aimsey's plan is good.

Schlatt sighs, lifting his phone up in his hand again. "Think about it, if you ever want to actually try get something done, come talk to me again. Door is always open to you lot."

Guqqie just nods, turning out of the doorway and heading towards the basement again.

They take the stairs two at a time, slamming their hand against the light switch and lighting up the room with the harsh artificial light that Guqqie has begun to get used to. They rub their eyes as they peel into the room.

Several computers lean against the wall, there's a couple of sleeping bags which have remained untouched since Tubbo… went away. There's a couple of empty bags of snacks around the computers. The ones around Aimsey's assigned computer are the worst.

Guqqie's area is relatively clean. They're here less than the others (the others *live* here). Their computer is also the worst one of the bunch in the room, Guqqie could switch to the one Tubbo used with a ridiculous amount of monitors but… that feels wrong.

They stumble into the computer chair, dropping their bag next to the desk and rubbing their eyes. Somehow it feels fitting that on the day Theseus returns Guqqie finds themselves in a windowless room sorting through files.

Ranboo, Guqqie, Sniff and Aimsey have gotten somewhere with the files though, they're starting to be sorted into various folders— there's still a lot of unsorted data, but it's a start. She starts with the stuff that has been sorted.

Guqqie starts with the records that they've already flagged with Fit, the one Ranboo found with the pay on it. Then comes the less exciting job of scrolling through pay slips and payrolls to try and find more mentions of 'Fit'.

Half an hour later, Ranboo comes into the room. He has a bowl of *something* that he's eaten, along with several ribbons. One has been tied around Ranboo's wrist, more are woven into their hair.

They give Ranboo a short smile and Ranboo returns it slightly awkwardly. Ranboo shakes their longer hair out, before sitting at the computer near Guqqie that has been claimed as his

own.

“Good day?”

“Weird day,” Ranboo stretches their arms up and their spine cracks in a way that has Guqqie wincing. “Let’s find this guy.”

“I guess.”

There’s something incredibly boring about trying to bring about the revolution through information. It means Guqqie and Ranboo sit in silence, leaning forwards to their computers as they try to figure out the entire affair.

A couple more payslips for ridiculous amounts of money are found, like *life changing* amounts of money each time.

“Assassin,” Ranboo says at the second paycheque they find with that much money. “They have assassins on payroll.”

“Assassins?” Guqqie repeats, “that’s a crime!”

“It’s an open secret,” Ranboo pushes themselves off the desk, rolling towards Guqqie to look at her screen. “Most people know that there are people who do the hero's dirty work— how do you think all the actual villains just disappeared without a trace. What do you think happens to retired heroes who start trying to speak out?”

“It’s an *open secret?”* Guqqie hisses. “People just know this?”

“Tubbo knew about it,” Ranboo shrugs, “I’m assuming Schlatt knows about it… if you run in certain circles it’s common knowledge, I guess. I reckon most of the older heroes know about it…”

Guqqie frowns at the screen.

Moving to L’Manberg has been one of the weirdest experiences of her life. The dull acceptance of thousands of things that *aren’t slightly okay* have Guqqie’s blood boiling. None of these people realise how unnormal all of this is.

Guqqie is afraid if she ever gets desensitised to it.

If finding out a government sponsored organisation has hired assassins working for them ever becomes *normal* and *okay* to Guqqie… she’s going to have to go back home. She will not live in a place where this is normal.

Guqqie frowns. “Would his address be on file somewhere?”

“Probably,” Ranboo says, “well— it’s on my payslip at work. I don’t know if that means anything in this case. You’d hope they’d be more careful about this. It would be pretty ballsy of them to just not… think anyone would ever find these files.”

They look at each other for five seconds.

“They definitely have them on file,” Guqqie and Ranboo say at the same time.

Ranboo pushes backwards, the rolling chair sliding them into their own spot as they start sorting through the various files again.

Two hours pass, and Guqqie’s eyes grow blurrier and blurrier with each payroll she checks. None of them are titled with any system she can understand and instead they have a string of letters that make no sense then a series of numbers that also makes no sense.

The only fucking reason William Nelson-Jones isn’t gone is because his *terrible* file sorting system saved his fucking ass.

Guqqie can’t help but feel like that might’ve been intentional.

They click on another file, Guqqie eyes scan over it for a few seconds before they fit up entirely.

The name *Fit Miller* is staring right back at her. As is his address *403C Court Crossing, Baker’s Lane.* There’s more information like bank accounts that Guqqie should probably pay more attention to.

Instead she throws their arms up in the air with joy.

“Found it!” Guqqie yells.

Ranboo flies out of their desk chair, standing behind Guqqie looking over her shoulder. Guqqie opens up another tab to search for the address, because shockingly enough Guqqie doesn’t know every address in L’Manberg off the top of their head.

It’s for an apartment complex in Kinoko, and an even quicker search reveals that the apartment itself is quite fucking nice. Which… makes sense, if someone was going to get that amount of life changing money regularly… Guqqie would hope they lived somewhere nice.

The photos of the apartment themselves are also interesting, it’s a photo from an inspection only a few months ago. Three of the rooms are clearly decorated for children, with the other room being a room for an adult which is incredibly sparse. The kid’s rooms are painfully bright in comparison.

Guqqie frowns, “does he have kids?”

“Seems like it…” Ranboo trails off. “Why did Aimsey want to find this guy?”

“I’m so glad you asked!” Aimsey’s voice shoots through the room. Ranboo and Guqqie both whip around, Ranboo’s hand reaching for something by their side out of instinct.

Aimsey jumps down the last few stairs, Sniff coming down the stairs after them. Both of them look out of breath and flustered, Aimsey has a cut on their cheek and Sniff has a mark on their cheekbone which is starting to darken.

What the fuck happened there?

“I want to find this guy because I’m pretty sure he shot Purpled in the face and also I’m pretty sure he was part of Ordo Theoritas.”

“Ordo Theoritas?” Guqqie asks.

“I *think* they were a group of old vigilantes,” Aimsey glances over Guqqie’s shoulder. “I also think… *Fit Miller* was helping me steal things out of Nelson-Jones office. Which we have to go through, Sniff.”

“Wait— wait, *what* ?” Guqqie says. “How do you know… any of this?”

“Snuck into a vent, listened in on important meetings with several people. Stole Nelson-Jones’s notebook off his desk. Fit saw me and didn’t snitch— we need to talk to him as soon as possible. I think he knows things that could take him down once and for all. He might have friends in Pandora’s too.”

Guqqie just stares at Aimsey for a few long seconds.

The entire room is tense with anticipation as all eyes are on Guqqie. Guqqie’s eye twitches as she realises the implications of everything Aimsey just said.

“WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU?” Guqqie stands, putting both of their hands on Aimsey’s shoulders, shaking them back and forth. “THAT COULD’VE GOTTEN YOU BOTH ARRESTED. RANBOO AND I ARE NOT SKILLED ENOUGH TO KICK OUT NELSON-JONES.”

“That’s kinda rude—”

Aimsey laughs, their hands latching over Guqqie’s own shoulders. “First of all, you and Ranboo would be fine. I trust you both. Second of all, we’re both okay Guqqie.”

“We can not afford to be reckless after Tubbo,” Guqqie spits.

“I’m guessing you don’t want to hear about the fact that Sam Warren almost died.”

The subsequent ‘catching up’ is something that has Guqqie frowning the entire time, while Ranboo looks slightly impressed about everything that transpired in one day.

Between the attempted assassination attempt (both Fit’s and Sniff’s). The sneaking into the office to hear Techno get manipulated and Aimsey to learn more and more about Ordo Theoritas and stealing the notebook and Theseus being back.

Guqqie feels tired and they weren’t even there.

Soon Aimsey and Sniff both pull out their phones to “go through evidence they’ve collected”, Aimsey’s video is just a loud recording of a fan with some murmuring in the background. Something that makes Aimsey swear repeatedly under her breath.

Sniff's is *slightly* more interesting, apparently a bunch of photos of the notebook Nelson-Jones had on his desk. Everyone gathers around Sniff's phone the way a family would around a newborn baby.

The first couple of pages are— just sketches of various things, with scribbles of numbers and names down next to them. The sketches are the sort of thing that someone does on the phone, just little things.

They're pretty good though.

Guqqie knows this because she is in art classes as a photographer, and honestly it's a little bit embarrassing for her to be in that class— but these are pretty good, they'd probably get a good grade in her class.

"These are pretty good," Guqqie mutters, "the shading is very naturalistic—"

Ranboo, Aimsey and Sniff all look up at her, a flat expression on their faces.

"What?"

"You're seriously complimenting the art?"

"… carry on."

The next few pages are just as nothing, with scribbles of dates and times in the future. Seemingly to be meetings, the only interesting one is the last meeting with the hero committee which was about a week and a half ago. The others are just— various heroes and business people and government people.

Somehow the next page is *more* interesting because it's just a bunch of meetings with Arthur Jenkins, which in itself isn't impressive, it's just the sheer amount of meetings with an otherwise busy president baffles Guqqie just a little bit.

"But the letter—" Sniff mutters, skipping across a couple of photos to what looks like the start of a letter. "He wrote out this letter, why are they writing letters if they meet that often?"

Guqqie sees the words: *Dearest Arthur* and immediately just stares at them.

That's gay.

"Letters are harder to trace," Ranboo says. "Most people who want to do dodgy shit still go through analogue systems, that's why it's a miracle half of the stuff on Nelson-Jones's computer is there at all."

"Surely they can just like— have an encrypted line?"

"I mean— Tubbo could unencrypt almost anything, they're not secure. Sending letters and burning them can be more secure if you don't want any evidence tracing them back to you." Ranboo brushes hair out of their eyes, chewing on their bottom lip.

“They’re trying to roll back all the fuckery they’ve done on Logstedchire though.” Aimsey mutters, eyes still on Sniff’s phone.

Guqqie just personally blacked out when she saw the word ‘dearest’ used to refer to the president. She manages to ignore all the other bullshit about feeling bad about Logstedchire. She doesn’t really care about that.

Dearest.

There’s plenty of pages which have the clear sign of being ripped up. But the fact that Arthur Jenkins comes up as many times as he does has Guqqie thinking of incredibly homosexual things.

Sniff then stops to stare at one of the photos.

She blinks at them for a few seconds.

Guqqie reads over their shoulder first.

Dearest Arthur,

While I understand you have been busy I have missed you greatly. I hope soon we are able to make some time to go and have a lovely dinner, perhaps spend the night at yours afterwards if you aren’t too busy for it.

Work here has gone well. Take care while making your negotiations, some of my people believe there is a plot to try and get you out of government. Turns out we are not popular globally, but none of them get a say. Please be careful and keep your guards nearby at all times.

I hope to see you soon.

Yours forever,
William

The message is crossed out with chicken scratch handwriting underneath it.

“ … now I know I’m gay, and this is clouding my judgement about this… but… *this letter is pretty gay right?* Like this is how people talk when they’re like— together. Right?”

Ranboo and Aimsey look at Guqqie like she’s grown an extra head.

“You’re suggesting the head of the hero committee and the president of the *entire country* are having a gay love affair?” Ranboo asks flatly.

Sniff squints at the photos on her phone, “uh— I mean I’m kinda getting that impression too?”

“Are either of them married? To… people who aren’t the other one?” Aimsey asks. “The gay thing is fine… the cheating thing probably isn’t?”

Guqqie pulls up Wikipedia for this exact purpose and tries not to trip over her own feet (despite standing completely still.)

“Catherine Jenkins,” Guqqie says, “three daughters with her… Elizabeth, Gwendolyn and Willow.”

There is a long silence between the group of them.

“Is… Willow named after William?”

Sniff lets out a long whistle, “this is messy.”

“Gay people…” Aimsey mutters under her breath. “Do you reckon it’s more or less embarrassing if they *are* actually together and Willow is named after him.”

“Less embarrassing if they are together— maybe they have a poly deal going on with Catherine.”

“Oh wait, that’s cute,” Aimsey coos.

Ranboo puts their head in their hands. “Please stop ‘aww-ing’ over fascists. Both of these men are as evil as men have ever been. Them being queer in literally any way does not take away from the fact they are evil and need to die.”

“Diversity win…” Aimsey mutters glancing at the letter on Sniff’s phone. “Wow— that *is* gay.”

There is then a deep philosophical discussion if outing fascists is allowed. Ranboo seems to think it is, because it’s not about the fact they’re maybe queer it’s about the fact that implies all sorts of corruption.

Guqqie thinks it’s fine— not for any particular reason like Ranboo has articulated. More because she just wants to see William Nelson-Jones suffer, she wants him to have to deal with the outfall of keeping this a secret. He wants him to be so miserable he fucking dies.

The anger is something that transcends a Guqqie knew they could feel. They look at all of their friends— people they adore more than anything. Ranboo and Sniff with fightings rings, Aimsey and Sniff forced to be heroes because there was no other choice, Tubbo who is in jail and may not even be alive.

Her fury rises in her throat until it nearly chokes her.

They don’t want three people who have suffered so heavily because of William Nelson-Jones to discuss *why* they shouldn’t make his life worse. *Why* do they have to take the higher ground against fascist dictators?

And they know now what Schlatt was talking about.

With a huff Guqqie sweeps out of the room as they discuss the ethics of *not* ruining this bastard’s life. She huffs as she storms up the stairs away from the room.

Guqqie finds themselves sitting on the balcony, there's a couple of balconies at Schlatt's place. Guqqie tends to move from balcony to balcony when she needs to think, and now she needs to think.

Still, Guqqie leans their back against the fence and cranes their head up to look at the stars. Something she does miss from home are the stars— Guqqie couldn't always see the stars, but in L'Manberg the light and air pollution, especially in Logstedchire makes the stars almost impossible to see.

Everything feels so much more complicated.

There's a knock on the sliding door, and Aimsey is standing on the other side.

Guqqie smiles at them, and Aimsey slides the door open, stepping through into the space that Guqqie is taking up. Aimsey sits down on the other side of the balcony, legs facing Guqqie's so their legs are tangled together.

Neither of them move to untangle them, even as Aimsey's ankle bone digs into Guqqie's shin.

"Hi," Aimsey says gently.

"Hey," Guqqie finds herself matching the tone, "are you alright?"

"What do you mean?"

"Feels like— a busy day for you," Guqqie says, "are you doing okay after it?"

And Guqqie knows that Aimsey can look after himself. Aimsey is one of the strongest, most competent people Guqqie has ever had the honour of meeting. Aimsey is brilliant and an amazing leader and an even better friend and they're just so irrevocably good that Guqqie is jealous sometimes.

Guqqie knows all of this— they also wonder… if Aimsey is looking out for everyone, who is looking out for Aimsey? Guqqie is no Sniff or Ranboo or even Tubbo, they don't have any sort of powers or super coding ability—

But she's trying, and that's worth enough to these people.

Aimsey hums, leaning their head back against the fence, "I think so," they say gently, "I really think so. Things are— a little bit awful right now, but I think they'll be better soon. Theseus returning is…"

"Big?"

"Huge," Aimsey says with a nod, "I think I know who he is."

"You didn't say that in the recap…" there's a slightly awkward silence as both of them acknowledge that significance of Aimsey not revealing what they know to Sniff and Ranboo, but to Guqqie.

Aimsey laughs, tucking some hair behind their ear. “I didn’t want— the others to know that I know.”

“Who?” Guqqie asks, because how could she not? How could she *not* ask the question everyone has been asking for months? There is no way she would be able to just… not ask.

“Thomas Underscore,” Aimsey says with a slightly desperate laugh, “and that makes Tubbo and Ranboo’s weirdness on the day of the break-in make sense. Ranboo left Tubbo behind to keep Tommy safe— Tubbo kept on with the mission.”

And all of what Schlatt said makes *so* much more sense. If he knows who Theseus is then— he would *know* how hard Theseus would fight to get Tubbo out of Pandora’s. They share the same last name, for fuck’s sake.

“We’ll be able to get Tubbo out of Pandora’s,” Guqqie whispers, “with Theseus’s help— surely? We can—”

Aimsey takes a deep breath, “I don’t know what to do— I don’t know if we should get Theseus on our side. He’ll want to get Tubbo out, I knew Tubbo and Tommy aren’t as close as they used to be— but I know Tubbo, and I know Tommy well enough and they’re loyal people. Almost to a fault. But… would Tubbo want this for his friend? Do we know if Tubbo is even alive?”

Guqqie shakes their head, “I still think it’s worth trying.”

“Me too,” Aimsey says, “me too—”

Guqqie just nods, eyes craning over to one of the nearby houses that are holding a party. Cops have probably been called— the cops seemingly know better than to try Logstedchire tonight.

“It’s always worth trying.” Aimsey says mostly to themselves.

Guqqie doesn’t respond, it doesn’t sound like the sort of thing that needs a response, just the sort of thing that needs to be said in the company of someone else. Being alone with Aimsey is comfortable in a way it’s never been comfortable before.

There’s a long moment of silence between them, Guqqie cranes their head so they’re looking out across the city. A bass sound reverberates through a few houses as people talk and a few flashing strobe lights are across Logstedchire.

The smell of old oil still dances in the air, Guqqie knows people are still celebrating. She also knows it’s less of a celebration of *Theseus* and more of a celebration when there is rarely reason to have any. It’s a celebration that the power dynamic has shifted again— no one can challenge Theseus, not really, meaning no one can challenge Logstedchire.

While the music is quiet, it is calming. It’s a song Aimsey seems to know and they hum it under their breath.

Aimsey isn’t a particularly good singer, nor are they particularly bad. Something about the humming feels like home— like quiet nights with music playing in the background and

laughter even when there's no reason to laugh.

Guqqie closes her eyes, head leaning back as she enjoys Aimsey humming quietly. Aimsey's humming settles in Guqqie's chest and for a moment Guqqie feels calm, like everything will be alright in the world.

It's nice.

Aimsey taps their fingers against the metal railing to the tune of the song, "could you come with me… to talk to Fit."

"Me?" Guqqie's eyes shoot open, "I think Ran or Sniff would be a better—"

"Sniff doesn't always do a lot in the way of understanding, Ranboo knows Purpled— they're too emotionally invested in it."

"I thought you wanted to do it alone," Guqqie says.

Aimsey gives her a small smile, "I like being alone with you."

All the air dispels from Guqqie's lungs at that simple, gentle confession.

Guqqie doesn't have a lot of time to acknowledge the giddy feeling that kicks up in their stomach. They shouldn't be devoting too much energy to the fluttery feeling inside her chest when Aimsey holds their eye contact.

Aimsey's eyes have the tiniest flecks of red in them, Guqqie hasn't seen the flecks before. Guqqie hasn't let herself look for this long before.

She probably shouldn't let herself look— they have a friend to save, they have a government to expose, they have an assassin to talk to. They have a vigilante to get onside.

Guqqie lets herself look for a few more moments, mapping Aimsey's face to remember all the details.

"Of course I'll go with you," Guqqie says, "through thick and thin, Commander Teese."

Aimsey rolls his eyes, nothing but fondness on his face, "if you all start calling me that I'm going to murder you all."

"It would be my honour to be murdered by you… Commander."

"I resent you."

Chapter End Notes

So… before I changed WNJ's backstory, he was going to be Kiera's biological dad but also Kiera wasn't aware of that. I will say now WNJ is a raging homosexual to the degree that it is dangerous to the general public. That's his slightly evil lesbian daughter y'all (behind every evil gay person is an eviler gayer person, WNJ is both of those to Kiera.)

ALSO guys. i'm gonna level with you. university is way fucking harder than i remember. So if updates become kinda weird and infrequent and i don't reply to comments anymore i'm SO SORRY but i am SO fucking busy (full time uni, three jobs, two clubs) and lately i've barely had time to breathe let alone write my beloved chapters

pasts

Chapter Notes

so. uh. ordo theoritas got out of hand so i came back and added this in.

ORDO IS IT'S OWN ARC NOW!!! PROBABLY SPANNING 2/3 CHAPTERS???

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ADDRESS BY HON. PRIME MINISTER OF L'MANBERG, MS KRISTINA BUSHRA TO PARLIAMENT

Central L'Manberg : 13/09/2042

Good morning, Madam Speaker,

Today I address the parliament to acknowledge our not-so distant histories that the opposition seem so keen on ignoring.

[SHOUTING IN THE CHAMBER]

Ignoring the messy histories of the past is no way to move forwards. To understand the future we must also understand the past. This is why I, Prime Minister Kristina Bushra, choose to acknowledge the vigilante group known as Ordo Theoritas.

There is a long way to go until we understand the full history of Ordo Theoritas with the amount that has been erased by former governments, but there is no understanding Logstedchire's future without understanding Logstedchire's past first.

We apologise for the former governments that have erased and targeted Ordo Theoritas and their families and the people who are no longer with us because of it. We hope that this will begin to make amends to thousands of people who were affected by past governments attempts to erase Ordo Theoritas and the disproportionate effect this has on Logstedchire.

I move that the education of Ordo Theoritas becomes a required part of the curriculum in all schools across the country, not just in Logstedchire.

[CHAOS ERUPTS IN THE CHAMBER]

I move that the entire country needs to know *why* Ordo Theoritas did what they did, and to deny that is to deny history itself. If people in Logstedchire were young enough to experience the things Ordo Theoritas did, then people in high school are perfectly capable of learning about the horrors this group of vigilantes faced.

There is no moving forwards without acknowledging our past.

We propose legislation that will include Ordo Theoritas in all levels of schooling, allowing children all over the country to understand why Ordo Theoritas happen, so that it never needs to happen again. That we are forced to

reckon with our own past so that we are not doomed, like previous governments to repeat our past mistakes.

And I ask the opposition… what do they have against this proposal? A proposal that teaches children how not to repeat your mistakes. Are the opposition afraid that as relics from an old failed government their constituents will learn who they really are and vote them out of their seats they have held for so long?

[MORE CHAOS ERUPTING IN THE CHAMBER, OVERLAPPING YELLING]

May our opposition gain a conscience before their constituents learn their roles in the Jenkins government.

Thank you Madam Speaker.

Chapter End Notes

,,, can u tell australia had an election a couple days ago with this piece because i sure as hell could.

BTW QUICK POLITICAL L'MANBERG LORE. They do have a president and a prime minister. This is the prime minister speaking. The president essentially works a bit like the governor general. Both the party in government and the opposition vote to elect a president they all like kinda agree on. Presidents don't have a set term in L'Manberg but there are protocols to remove them (there weren't when Jenkins was president these were more recently added in.) They PROBABLY use the hare-clark voting system (I like the hare-clark voting system that's mostly why)

Politics rant over. Enjoy!

ordo

Chapter Summary

> Two children slip out of the cell and into the world, unseen by any adults who can otherwise tell them what to do.
>
> And it's that simple, that's the start of *Fit and Pac*.
>
> The end is a lot louder than the beginning is.

or, ordo theoritas and how it began.

Chapter Notes

> WELCOME TO THIS VERY NORMAL AND SCHEDULED UPDATE DO NOT CONSIDER WHAT THE DATE IS PLEASE!!!!!!
>
> I offer you… three songs for this chapter. On Your Side by The Last Dinner Party, Supercut by Lorde and also Ribs by Lorde. I am going to say. Reading these next two chapters with NO knowledge of QSMP at all is going to be quite funny for you. And for people who do know QSMP lore… we have some surprises in here too.
>
> **WARNINGS:** These next two chapters are generally a bit darker than ILAF has been up until now so here is a quick (NON EXHAUSTIVE) list of some things in these next two chapters: throwing up, blood & violence, gore, non consensual drug use, suicidal ideation, limb loss (this happens a surprising amount), cannibalism, death, descriptions of bodies
>
> None of the things in these chapters are completely uncharted territory for TINAAOS/ILAF, it's just happening in a much tighter time frame than it usually does and uh… generally a bit more descriptive because I've gotten way better at writing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On his worst nights Fit lets himself remember.

Generally he's okay at keeping it all inside, generally there's things to focus on— jobs to do and soccer practices and everything that Fit didn't get as a child. But— after facing Purpled it's like something has been unscrewed in his brain.

Empathy powers aren't that rare— they're one of the more common types along with relatively minor healing. But what *is* rare is the surge of emotions that rushed through Fit when Purpled locked eyes with him.

In that moment he was a child being abandoned and he was a teenager being abandoned and he was hitting people with bats and he was stitching up his own wounds and he was terrified of a woman with dark hair and a stern face but there was warmth.

For a split second in time, Fit felt all the terror this teenage boy did at the realisation he was dying.

That's why Fit missed his shot. Not because of some greater plan— just because the emotions of it overwhelmed him. He didn't mean to miss— missing has caused him more trouble than it was worth.

He just keeps thinking about everything that's ever happened in his life. It's a poor replay of every fractured event he remembers, meeting Cellbit and their first mission and everything else interlaced throughout that time. The memory of when Richas and Em were brought home and Tina and Bagi and Pac and Jaiden and—

All these people who are no longer here.

It's Fit and Cellbit and the kids.

And he tries not to think about it, he really does— but still after the kids are tucked in bed, Fit curls onto his side in bed. He tries to make himself smaller the way he did when he was a child.

He used to share a bed with other people in Ordo like this— earlier than that he shared a bed with Pac like this, before it meant anything and they were just two kids trying to survive. He remembers the nights they nearly froze to death during the winter when the snow started to cover everything.

Fit flexes his hand, just to make sure he can do it.

He rolls onto his back, staring up at the ceiling because there's no other option. His bed is giant now, it's fluffy and fits all of his little rag tag family in it. The kids have sheltered here from nightmares for years now.

And here's the thing— Fit knows it's dumb, he knows that Pac isn't going to hear anything Fit says. He knows… but that doesn't stop him from opening his mouth anyway, maybe it's more for him anyway.

"Richas is good," Fit says to no one in particular, "Em is also good. We're doing okay."

Fit's never had the energy to believe in a god.

Sometimes he thinks believing that Pac is still out there and alive is the closest Fit will ever get to believing in some higher power. He doesn't even know if Pac is *alive* , but it's nice to imagine Pac how they were when they were kids.

Fit hauls himself out of bed with the sudden urge to rip things apart. It was something that used to bother him when he was younger, it's turned into something more muted most nights. Any time Fit has been close to a genuine breakdown he has been able to hand the kids over to Cellbit and leave.

He never wants one of them to see Fit when he's breaking.

Tonight is different though— the feeling is back with the same ferocity it was when he was seventeen. He's mourning— he's never stopped mourning all these years later and worst of all he's *remembering.*

He's remembering everything and all of it and he hates it because remembering doesn't change anything. Then he hates himself because deep down he enjoys remembering. He enjoys being able to hold onto the memories that are starting to slide away from him.

He doesn't remember Jaiden's eye colour, he doesn't remember the look on Bagi's face whenever she got flustered by Tina. He doesn't remember Charlie's expression when he would be telling a joke and trying not to break as he told it.

Fit stumbles towards the kitchen sink, grabbing a glass and filling it up.

Then there's a knock at the door.

He glances at the clock he has hanging up, it's 1am. Historically people knocking on Fit's door at 1am has never meant anything good for his life in the long run. Fit glances at the water glass in his hand.

Moving towards the door slowly, he taps his finger against the glass and the water moves towards it. It's always ideal to know that he still has that under control if he ends up fighting people.

The door gets knocked on again.

Fit opens it.

Standing in front of him is Aimsey Teese.

Fit doesn't actually know a lot about Aimsey Teese— he does know that they're one of the new hero trainees, being trained by Techno. He does know that Aimsey was chosen almost solely because they thought their powers could fight Theseus.

Most important, he does know Aimsey was listening in on his conversation with William Nelson-Jones. He doesn't know *how* Aimsey found him, only that they did and this could either mean very good or very bad things.

Fit almost doesn't notice that Aimsey isn't alone.

Standing next to Aimsey is a taller woman, she looks quite young— maybe late teens or early twenties. Her hair is pink with blonde roots. She's taller than Aimsey by a noticeable amount. There's something sharp about her blue eyes that Fit isn't really used to.

The girl isn't the one who was in the vent with Aimsey— (Fit would have to put his bets on that being Sniff, Techno's other hero trainee.)

Fit glances down at his glass of water and then up at Aimsey and the other one. "Can I help you?"

"You can actually," Aimsey basically shoves past Fit and walks into the house. Then Aimsey trips over a smaller pair of shoes.

Aimsey stays staring at the shoes for a few seconds, they're Ramón's shoes with little racing cars on them. Their eyes dart over to the shoe rack, seeing a bunch of children's shoes. Aimsey's mouth twists into a strange expression and they look at Fit.

"You have kids?"

"Mhm."

"How many?"

"Three. Two boys and a girl."

"Cute," the other girl says, taking her shoes off at the door. "I have two brothers."

"You do?" Aimsey asks.

"Yeah— I'm the middle child," she kicks her shoes underneath the shoe rack without seeming to mean to. Fit would bet that they have a shoe rack at home as well, because she looks down at her sock cladden feet then at the shoes, seemingly confused. "Oh! I'm Guqqie."

"Fit."

"Yeah, I knew that." Guqqie steps into the apartment.

Both of them look around as the two strangers look at all of the details of Fit's apartment. They look at the painting and drawings from Em and the Lego on the floor from Ramón. There's family pictures on the wall and fridge. The pull-out bed for Cellbit is still there with blankets thrown over it because that's Richas's favourite place to sit.

Fit watches both of them sit on his couch.

"What do you want?" Fit eventually asks, the water in the cup is his only real comfort.

Aimsey leans forwards. "I want to know about Ordo Theoritas."

And Fit has been through a lot— it still feels like his entire body freezes up for a moment as he realises exactly how much Aimsey must know. Aimsey wants to know more and Fit hates that.

“Why did Nelson-Jones speak to you like that? What even is Ordo Theoritas— the name keeps showing up everywhere. Who are Latrodectus and Haurire?”

Each name and reminder feels like the knife being twisted, the knife that was stabbed into Fit’s heart and never removed years ago. It twists and twists and Fit half thinks he might actually die from the grief that he’s been trying to ignore for so long.

“We also came across the name Bobby… who is that?”

Fit finds himself collapsing into the armchair across from the couch. He looks between the two of them. Both seem genuinely curious.

“How did you find my address?”

“Your payroll,” Guqqie looks at their nails.

“You have that?”

Aimsey sighs, brushing their hands on their pants. “We’re part of the group responsible for the data breach at the hero tower a week ago. We have the express goal of taking down Nelson-Jones. I think you alone would have enough testimony to throw him in jail for decades.”

And Fit wants to laugh— he really does, at these teenagers thinking they can change the world. He wants to laugh about all of it, because teenagers *tried* to change the world and now they’re adults— Fit still has to mourn his friends he lost decades ago.

Fit hopes things change, he hopes they change so much— he hopes they change for his children and every child born in Logstedchire in the future. He hopes it changes and he hopes that gives him a chance to see his friends again, if he could finally learn if they were dead or alive or what.

“So you’re Elysium? Good work on the hero hall attack—”

“No. We’re just us. Not Elysium, not the heroes— think of us like a third player in the game. We’re *trying* to sneak under everyone’s noses, to find enough information and then leak it to a bunch of activist groups.”

Fit sips at his glass of water. “You *seriously* think that’s going to do anything?”

“Better than doing nothing— better than becoming Nelson-Jones lap dog and going off to kill anyone he commands,” Aimsey’s voice drops into something lower and dangerous.

At that moment Fit starts to get it.

He gets how Aimsey, who seems nothing but lovely and gentle could be leading this entire thing. He understands that Aimsey’s eyes look gentle but they are determined. And he understands that Aimsey must be the sort of person that others listen to and trust.

Fit crosses his arms. “You *really* think that’s what I am? You think I enjoy this?”

“You haven’t exactly given me a reason to believe otherwise.” Aimsey leans forwards. “All I know is you tried to murder Purpled in cold blood— I don’t know if you succeeded. I know you have three kids and I know where you live. I know that you’re one of Nelson-Jones’s assassins. That’s all I have to work with— work with me here, Fit.”

Fit leans back in the armchair, crossing his arms and trying not to resent Aimsey.

“Ordo Theoritas was a vigilante group… it didn’t start out that way though—”

And when it comes down to it… what does Fit have to lose? He knows that his children will not be harmed— not by these two, and Nelson-Jones already dangles their safety above his head every day.

Cellbit and Fit have a billion plans for if that happens.

And Fit… who fought in his youth for a better world is so tired of having to sit by and work for someone he hates more than anything. He hates that he chose to work for one of the sole people responsible for every tragedy that has ever happened in his life.

If his dumb story about a dumb vigilante group that never amounted to any change can help this group Aimsey is a part of. If it can help William Nelson-Jones be ground into the dust and dirt where he fucking belongs… who is he to deny that?

“Ordo Theoritas was an organised vigilante group in North-East Logstedchire. We formed officially… about thirteen years ago, we had all known each other before that though.”

“We?” Aimsey asks.

Fit nods. “We. I was a part of it.”

And that’s what makes Aimsey and Guqqie look genuinely baffled. Guqqie’s mouth actually falls open and Aimsey’s eyes go wide as they sit back in their seat. Their eyes scan Fit for any signs that he’s a liar.

“The first person I met was Pac—”

Pac is a lovely individual. He’s been a rock while Tubbo has been stressed out of his mind, he’s the best roommate someone in prison *could* hope for. He doesn’t make fun of Tubbo when he cries, and joins in on the scheming and the conspiracies.

Also he has connections.

Which would be good if anyone ever tried to bother Tubbo anymore, but a few days have passed and very few people even look at Tubbo wrong. He’s going to count it as a combination of Pac’s and Kingston’s influence.

All of that being said.

If Pac doesn’t stop sleeping-talking, Tubbo is going to smother Pac to death in his sleep.

The worst part is— Tubbo knows enough Portuguese to know what Pac is talking about. Tubbo can't get every word, the curse of knowing six languages and only half knowing the languages he does know.

What he *does* know with his limited knowledge is that Pac is talking about a guy. Tubbo knows it's about Fit, even if *Fitche* and Fit don't sound exactly the same, the way Pac's voice seems to soften around the letters of the word tells Tubbo all he needs to know.

Tubbo sighs, rolling over and putting his pillow over his ear trying to block out the sleep talking. Hearing *anything* feels like intruding and that's not something Tubbo wants at all, he doesn't *want* to know things through this.

Then all in an instant there's the sound of blankets rustling and Pac's breathing getting slightly heavier.

Tubbo rolls back over, seeing Pac sitting up in the dim light of the room.

Pac takes a deep breath before rubbing his eyes and glancing over at Tubbo, he must see a light reflected in Tubbo's eyes or something because Pac lets out a small exhale of air which is almost a laugh.

"Bom dia," Tubbo says.

Pac smiles a little bit wider at that, "you know Brazilian Portuguese?"

"Bits," Tubbo sits up, "I could probably understand like half a conversation."

"Me too," Pac doesn't quite laugh, but there seems to be the remnants of amusement in his voice. "The guards don't really like it when we don't use English— they think Bagi and I could be… uh, scheming?"

"Are you scheming?"

"Sometimes."

There's a steady break in the conversation. Pac seems to be dealing with whatever it is he needs to deal with, Tubbo is itching to ask so many questions. He wants to ask about Fit, he wants to ask about vigilantism and what any of that means.

"Hey Pac…"

Pac must hear something in Tubbo's tone, before slowly he looks over at Tubbo. His face is doing a million things that Tubbo doesn't know how to decode. He looks worried, he looks afraid, he looks happy—

Pac is hard to read. Tubbo doesn't know how to start trying.

"I— looked at your file briefly… why are you in here for vigilantism?"

It feels like the air becomes thicker instantly. Pac's eyes land on Tubbo and for a few seconds all Pac can do is stare at him with a slightly open mouth. Then Pac shakes his head like that'll take the heavy air out of the room.

"You— you don't know?"

Tubbo shakes his head very slowly.

"Huh…" Pac says, "Nelson-Jones did a… he did a very good job, I guess you would say."

Tubbo is quiet for a long moment as Pac tries to collect himself.

"Ordo Theoritas was an organised vigilante group," Pac starts.

Tubbo leans forwards.

"But we had all been friends before that, you know? We had worked together before we decided to do anything official about it."

Pac has always thought his story was sadder than the other people in Ordo. Except maybe for Bad— but Bad was only ever half a part of Ordo. He never involved himself in the fighting, he was just their friend.

He thinks his story is sad because he almost had everything.

He will never have to live with the 'what if' that the others do, because Pac had all the things his future friends and confidants will yearn for. It's so, so much easier to miss something when you've had it. It feels like Pac will spend the rest of his life missing things he had when he was very young.

Pac was born in Logstedchire into a loving family, and that'll always be the worst part. He doesn't have hazy memories of a family beforehand. His parents didn't die before he could start remembering them.

His childhood was gentle in a way that was rarely afforded to kids from Logstedchire, Pac remembers barbecues and chasing his siblings around at the beaches in North L'Manberg. He remembers his mother's cooking and he remembers what it feels like to be at home.

There were very few benefits to having a parent who was a superhero—

Pac's was that his childhood was gentle. His childhood consisted of going to a decent school and making friends. It consisted of him making plans for the future— he wanted to be a hero. He didn't even know he *had* powers at that point.

He just knows how much he loved dressing up as a hero. He'd play heroes with his friends in the park and he'd yell at them and he'd use his 'superpowers' to defeat the villains and it was something pure and innocent.

His dad dies while working, the fact that he made it as long as he did seems to be some kind of miracle. He dies in an attack where there's a lot of damage to an important building in Upper L'Manberg— all of the payout that is supposed to go to them goes to fixing the building.

Then his life from there unravelled incredibly quickly and with incredible speed.

His mum and older brother freeze to death during the night of a particularly cruel winter. When they get kicked out of their apartment and all they have is their car. Pac still doesn't know if they're buried in marked graves.

His younger sister ran.

Pac still doesn't know where to.

He hopes she's okay.

Tubbo can do nothing but stare at Pac with horror. He blinks a few times, then blinks a few times as he tries to make any of this make sense. The family of heroes are supposed to get payouts when they die.

Pac's family were one of the few from Logstedchire.

It's not hard to put together and that lights a fire in his gut. He *hates* that, he *hates* that's even an option at all. He hates and he hates William Nelson-Jones and he hates anyone who let that decision happen.

Two people who were innocent in every way are dead because *someone* decided that their family didn't deserve a payout.

"Your dad was a hero?"

Pac just nods, legs hugged to his chest.

"Your— family—"

Pac smiles, there's nothing humourous. The smile is the smile of a person who wants to rip their own skin off, the smile is a smile of someone who had to see the frozen bodies of their families tucked in their car.

"I— I'm so sorry—"

"Save it," Pac's tone is still light but there's something darker in his eyes. "It hasn't changed what happened. I had it good when I was little— I can't say the same about most of my other friends."

"Did you other friends wake up one morning to see their family gone?"

Pac leans his head back against the wall, he gives a great sigh. He shakes his head. “Most of them had family who died or abandoned them when they were very young. Roier was the only one who had family I met… his grandfather was kind.”

“I’m— I’m sorry just— for all of you.”

Pac shakes his head. “Tubbo— do you really think it’s changed? Where are your parents— did your friends grow up with their parents? Do any of them have family? Your life hasn’t been much different to ours.”

Tubbo bites his lip— because Aimsey and Guqqie both have parents in their life. But that’s… really the only people Tubbo *knows* who have family in their lives that hasn’t been found. Almost everyone else Tubbo’s known has had to claw their way to find family, to put pieces together that might not fit and make themselves a family.

Tommy’s parents died when he was four. Ranboo’s memory loss means if he even did have parents they can’t remember them. Purpled doesn’t have— anyone, the first people Purpled really *had* were their little group. Sniff’s family abandoned them to the fighting rings.

Maybe it hasn’t changed.

Pac must see something in Tubbo’s expression because for a few moments he looks devastated. He shakes his head and wipes at his eyes.

“A month or so later I met Fit… he was the first one I met. Meeting him was weird— it felt like the first time I thought I would be able to survive after my family had…” Pac’s expression twists into one of grief. “Y’know… he just had this certain determination about him, this drive to survive… I don’t think I had a lot of that.”

A lot of Fit’s childhood has blurred into one painful experience. He *knows* his childhood was traumatic, particularly for someone in Logstedchire, he knows this because his childhood is blank apart from memories that are less memories and more feelings of unbridled horror and fear.

If Fit could remember most of it, he’s sure that he’d need therapy more than he already does.

His parents died before Fit could remember them, mass industrial accident, fifty-eight people died in that accident. As Fit would later find out, the Zeno siblings also lost their dad during that accident.

Before they could talk they were tied together by tragedy.

Fit doesn’t remember a lot of his time in the orphanage, he remembers brusies and being terrified and there being a lack of food and it being overcrowded. When he’s older he’ll think about how overworked these orphanages were, and Fit will find no one else to blame but the governments.

He doesn't remember *why* he left. If there's an incident that led him to do it, it must've been so traumatic and unspeakable that his brain has almost completely blocked it out.

One thing Fit does know is how it feels to have a rib collapse your lung.

Fit doesn't remember *how* he knows that. During his time with Ordo Theoritas that never happened to him, Pac would never let anyone be in pain for long when he could and Fit always wore armour around his torso.

It's not an illogical jump in logic to make— the feeling of wheezing around blood and bile hasn't come from nowhere.

He just knows that prison was better than staying at the orphanage, and he truly doesn't remember why. He doesn't know what was the straw that broke the camel's back, he will just know that he decided, for a reason he can't remember, that stealing and taking his chances in jail seemed more appealing than whatever the orphanage had given him.

When Fit finds himself in a holding cell for the third time it is when everything changes. A bunch of people are sheltered in this cell— people never freeze to death in cells and this winter has been particularly rough.

Fit hugs his coat around his shoulders trying to keep warm. Even in the crowded cell it's still cold, Fit can feel the snow seeping into his bones. His breath is still coming out in front of him as puffs.

There's a grunt, then the familiar noise of the cell door being slid open. Fit glances up at whoever else is getting shoved in here.

Standing at the door is a relatively young boy, maybe Fit's age, maybe a bit younger. His hair is black and shaggy around his face, it's not curly but sticks in all directions somehow. The most noticeable thing in the dimming light of the evening are two bright yellow eyes that stare directly at him.

Fit feels his own eyes go wider as the boy's bore into his.

He stumbles in the cell, a push from the officer. Everyone else in the cell ignores him, but the boy heads straight over towards Fit, dropping on the ground in front of him. The boy's face is flushed from the cold, he's breathing heavily, chest rising and falling.

"Who are you?" His voice is accented in a way that Fit doesn't recognise, but there's something gentle about the way he speaks that goes beyond accents. All of his words seem to curve at the end.

Fit's never met anyone who speaks gently quite like this boy does.

"Fit." And suddenly Fit is aware of how ungentle his own voice is, it's never been something he's been forced to think about until now. Now he can hear the ugly twists in his own voice and can imagine where the boy's tone softens, his gets firmer.

"I'm Pac," the boy says and holds his hand out in front of him.

Fit takes it, because what else is he supposed to do?

Pac's hand grasps around his own and shakes it firmly a few times before dropping it. "Why are you here?"

"Third degree murder," Fit deadpans.

For the first time in years, someone laughs around Fit. Pac's entire face manages to keep itself calm for a few moments, then he leans back, his eyes crinkle at the corners and his mouth opens. What comes out is a full belly laugh, something that Fit hasn't heard in years.

The sound is weird and unfamiliar and Fit finds himself wanting to hear it more. He know that sound is weird because a few of the adults also shoved into this holding cell turn around to look at them, questions on their face.

They quickly dismiss it as the musings of children, turning back to their conversations about things Fit doesn't understand.

Pac stops laughing, but the smile still stays on his face with the remnants of that laughter.

Fit half wants to reach out and trace the expression with his finger to make sure that it's a real thing he's experiencing in front of him. It's been so long since someone has smiled around Fit, let alone laughed that he half thinks all of this is some absurd dream he's making up in his head.

"Ah!" Pac says like that's the obvious reason. "Then I am here for some awful, horrible crime that they will talk about on the news and can never be mentioned again."

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

Pac leans forwards in a conspiratory way, his eyes are alight with amusement and Fit has no choice but to lean in too. Two children conspiring in a holding cell will be the start of what is yet to come.

"I punched a hero in the face."

The noise that comes out of Fit's mouth is almost laughter. It sounds more like a cry of shock than laughter because Fit is so unfamiliar with laughter.

Pac looks at him, amusement on his face.

"Did you actually?" Fit hisses back.

Pac nods, nothing but sheer unfiltered pride on his face.

With another noise of shock-laughter, Fit leans back against the wall, staring his new friend in the eyes with nothing but sheer bafflement at the person sitting in front of him. Someone who was able to make him laugh in less than a minute or two.

It feels good to laugh.

Pac sighs, moving around so he's leaning against the wall next to Fit. Fit doesn't really mean to, but he ends up flinching. His entire body jolts and Pac just looks at him with a strange expression on his face.

He opens his mouth like he's going to say something, before closing his mouth and just looking forwards.

No one ever really gets this close to Fit without the intention of hurting him, it feels like his entire body is on fire as Pac is next to him. There's only a few centimetres between Pac's shoulder and his own.

"So…" Pac drawls like he's truly never been as bored in his life. "What do you think about… well… everything."

"Everything?" Fit screws up his face. "That's a lot of things to think about."

Pac doesn't laugh, but he looks like he's about to for a few seconds. "No, about being in *prison,* silly."

"Uh— they feed us most of the time?"

"Most?" Pac repeats, then his entire face screws up. "That's not good enough! You need food to survive and be healthy."

And for a moment Fit feels a pang of something in his chest that he wasn't really aware he *could* feel. Pity. Pac clearly is from a richer family— or has only recently fallen on tough times. He seems genuinely perplexed at the concept of not being healthy or eating every day.

Those thoughts seem to play on his face because Pac frowns at him. "It's crowded…" Pac says instead.

And Fit wasn't in love with Pac as soon as he saw him— that's a ridiculous concept considering both of them were twelve and didn't know each other. The love would come later and be its whole separate mix of emotions.

But Fit does know this.

Pac is not a cheerful person naturally. That's something a lot of people who don't know Pac very well get wrong about him. Pac's cheerfulness and the light he seems to exude from the core of his being is something that Pac has had to work for.

That's something that Fit has seen Pac scramble onto hold time and time again.

Even when they're twelve, sitting in a crowded prison cell, not knowing how the future would unfold in front of them. Fit knows that Pac is one of the brightest people that Fit will ever meet. He also knows that is something Pac chooses to be.

And Fit smiled, an actual smile. It feels wrong on his face, like Fit isn't quite used to it. He's not. Pac pokes him in the cheek, a similar smile spreading across his face. Pac grins, he leans over towards Fit.

“I think we should get out of here…” Pac whispers.

Fit hums, he looks at a few of the adults standing near each other talking in quiet tones. They’re all close enough that Fit thinks he could manage it, it’ll tire him out, but that’s okay. Pac says he wants to leave…

And Fit will make that happen however he can.

So Fit raises one of his fingers and focuses on the smallest man in the group. He’s a scrawny little thing, Fit is pretty sure he has more muscle than this grown ass man. Fit tilts his head to the side.

He can do this—

With a deep breath Fit closes his eyes, and tries to imagine what this man’s heart rate is like. It’s probably quick, beating in his throat and ears as he tries to keep up with a conversation with people who are bigger and stronger than him.

Fit imagines how the blood runs through this man, how is spreads out to his hands and fingers and—

He pushes the blood against the man’s hand.

So the scrawny man punches the person next to him in the face.

The effect is immediate and terrifying. Everyone immediately turns on each other, there is yelling and hands and arms flying as people yell and scream obscenities at each other.

Fit grabs Pac’s hand, and moves both of them right next to the cell door.

Heavy footsteps run down the hall soon, and the door flings open as several guards force themselves into the prison cell.

And in the middle of the brawl that Fit started, when several guards have run in and forgotten to close the door behind them—

Two children slip out of the cell and into the world, unseen by any adults who can otherwise tell them what to do.

And it’s that simple, that’s the start of *Fit and Pac.*

The end is a lot louder than the beginning is.

Fit glances between Aimsey and Guqqie. Guqqie has a curious expression on her face, leaning into Aimsey slightly. Aimsey has no judgement on her face, just a sense of curiosity and genuinely, actually listening.

“So… blood manipulation?” Guqqie says.

Fit nods.

“Can you still do it?”

“Not really,” Fit examines his own hand. “I haven’t trained in it for a long time. They worked on weakening my powers when I first started working for them. I probably could if I really wanted to.”

“Guessing you don’t want to?” Aimsey asks.

Fit picks up the half full cup of water on the coffee table. He holds his hand over it and lets the water draw upwards towards his hand where it gathers in a glove-like-bubble around his knuckles.

“Woah,” Guqqie whispers, shifting forwards. “I haven’t seen that before.”

“Water manipulation is one of the more common powers,” Aimsey explains.

And like that Fit knows that Guqqie isn’t from around here. Any self-respecting person from L’Manberg knows the most common powers— normally minor water manipulation, light gravity manipulation and slight healing powers.

Interesting…

“Can any people with water powers use their powers on blood manipulation?”

“No. Blood is a lot more than water— blood is about only fifty percent water. In my case *because* I can manipulate blood I can manipulate water. I’m not as powerful as someone trained in water manipulation. Some people with water manipulation can learn blood, but it takes a lot of training and effort. Took me two years to learn how to calm someone’s heart rate down.”

“How’d you meet the others? You said there were more— how’d you meet ‘em?”

Fit sighs. “We met the Zeno twins first— we fought over food. Street urchins are gonna be street urchins…”

Pac and Fit met the Zeno twins a little bit like this: Pac wrapped his coat around him, it was far too big for him and probably better fitted for Fit, but Fit already had his coat that was perfectly sized for him.

They hadn’t managed to steal another one that would work better. So Pac stayed in the bright blue coat as they headed down the street towards the volunteer soup kitchen that would get set up twice a week.

Neither of them had eaten in a day. While they had been able to find a place to sleep which was warm and they were confident they weren’t going to freeze in the night, food had become a lot harder. The bakeries in Logstedchire had gotten more careful about throwing out their things.

It was tough times for everyone, not just the homeless street urchins who scrambled around for food.

Pac keeps himself as close to Fit as he can— he knows it is a little bit dumb at this point, Fit isn't some almighty beacon of strength. He just… has experience being homeless, it doesn't hurt that Pac has watched Fit beat up other street urchins enough times that his trust for Fit is slowly increasing every day.

Fit hasn't led him wrong yet. So Pac keeps closer to Fit, their shoulders bumping as they head down the road.

The line to the soup kitchen gets longer and longer every time. It seems now there are less kids showing up and older teenagers now. There's a bunch of bright coats and dark coats standing in the line. Breaths puff out in front of these people.

Fit without hesitation moves both of them into the children's line.

Kids get served first, it's a rule that all the adults seem to just accept and Pac sees the way their eyes soften whenever they look at them. He sees that all of these people— suffering and broke and probably homeless often try to give the kids *something.*

Today they get five dollars and also a stuffed animal that Pac tucks underneath his arm. The stuffed animal is a shark, and something someone brought specifically out for them. Fit's face screws up when he sees it, but it softens when he sees how Pac is looking at the stuffed shark.

Now they have a stuffed shark. Pac is probably going to call him something dumb, he needs to think on it more though.

Fit and Pac shuffle into the line.

In front of them are two kids both with brown hair. They both look more ragged than Fit and Pac, with rips in their coats and boots that clearly are too big for them. They're about the same height, with the girl being just a little bit taller.

They look very alike, with the same sloping nose and wrinkle in between their eyes. The most interesting they have in common though is both of them have a white patch at the front of their hair.

The girl adjusts her hat, looking over her shoulder at Fit and Pac before looking back at her brother— (Pac has to assume brother.)

"The boy behind us seems dangerous." The girl says.

Now that alone isn't the shocking thing— the shocking thing comes from the fact she talks in Portuguese, which nearly makes Pac faceplant into the snow. He manages to keep his face as calm as possible.

It's just— he hasn't heard anyone talk Portuguese in a while… he's heard a little bit of it at some of the shops Pac used to frequent before he met Fit. It's just— been long enough that Pac wants to cry at hearing familiar words.

He is also vaguely aware that giving away he knows the language the two siblings are speaking could put him at a massive disadvantage. So instead, Pac closes his mouth and keeps his eyes blank on the line ahead.

“He’s just tall.” The boy replies back. “They seem younger than us— we can take them in a fight without any trouble. If a fight breaks out grab the smaller one, use him as leverage.”

Pac opens his mouth to reply with something just as nasty. He instead crosses his arms and tries to keep his vision on the line in front of him. It’s rude that he gets to be the *smaller one* . He has a name and identity.

He would’ve taken ‘the blue one’ over ‘the smaller one’.

He’s not even *that* much shorter than Fit.

Fit glances at Pac, his eyebrows slightly narrowed. He glances at the siblings standing in front of him before shrugging.

Pac gives a short smile back, he brushes his hair out of his face before tapping his foot on the ground.

Slowly the line moves and the siblings in front of Fit and Pac are grabbing the food. Today’s food seems to be bread bowls with pumpkin soup inside of them. Pac has missed bread so much that he nearly cries when he sees the two siblings get handed their two separate ones.

Soon two plates with bread bowls on them are pushed towards them.

Pac picks his up and takes a spoon for good measure. Fit takes a massive handful of napkins, four knives, four forks and four spoons. Everyone knows it’s excessive but no one says anything about it. The lady who serves them only gives them a gentle smile and wishes them both a good day.

They settle against the nearby wall of a building, their backs leaning against it as they frantically look around to make sure no one is going to steal anything off of them. Sitting against the wall, a good ten metres down are the two siblings from before.

Pac side eyes them both for a moment before focusing on his bread bowl. Some creepy twins aren’t going to stop him from eating the first real meal he’s eaten in thirty-six hours. He eats the soup as quickly as he can, more excited to get to the bread than anything else.

Fit eats slower, his eyes darting around every few moments for some sort of threat. No one has ever tried to attack them at one of these, it’s one of the few places Pac can actually feel safe. He shovels more soup into his mouth as Fit keeps glancing around.

“We could take it off them.”

It takes every bone in Pac’s body to stop himself from whipping his head towards the boy leaning against the wall. Terror floods his body as he realises— they might actually get attacked.

“That feels mean,” the girl says, but her voice doesn’t have as much resistance in it as Pac would like. She sounds like someone who is very, very hungry and Pac can’t fault her too much for that.

As it happens, Pac is very, very hungry too.

Pac nudges Fit, “we should probably head.”

“What—” Fit turns to look at his bread bowl. “I’ve barely started.”

“Just trust me—”

Then the siblings are standing in front of them. The girl looks down at the both of them, a strange expression on her face.

“Interesting accent,” Cellbit says.

Ah. Yes— a minor detail… Pac forgot that even while speaking English he has an accent, one that is quite recognisable. Especially by people who have similar accents. The way he pronounces words is incredibly Brazilian.

“Ah. This could be quite awkward.” Pac says in Portuguese because he can and he’s missed saying the words and how it all just feels right in his mouth. “Hello.”

Fit looks at him raising an eyebrow.

“Just give us your food and we can avoid this fight,” the girl says, “because we will win.”

Pac thinks about that for a few seconds. These two seem a lot scrappier than Pac— but for some reason Pac is pretty sure Fit is scrappier than both of them. Pac isn’t as strong, but he is plenty fast and really good at screaming for help.

This fight wouldn’t be as easy as these two are claiming it would be.

Fit fights like someone who is fighting for his life every time. Pac— well Pac is really the personality hire in this friendship.

“Nah,” Pac blinks at the two of them.

“Nah?” the boy repeats. “Alright—”

And Pac has got to give Fit some sort of award, because despite not understanding the language any of them are speaking (he thinks). Fit immediately kicks the girl in the shin, rolling out of the way and scrambling up onto his feet.

Pac heads the other way, stumbling to his feet and managing to keep his bread bowl in his hands.

For a moment all of them stare at each other.

Fit is the first one to lunge, moving forwards and launching himself at the girl. The boy in turn swings at Fit, and Fit ducks out of the way of it. He moves so he's around at the girl's side before grabbing the back of her coat and yanking backwards.

There's immediate yelling around them, as one of the attendants start to rush over saying something.

The boy swings towards Fit, and Fit manages to throw his weight backwards.

"Banned from these premises for—"

And… well… if they're already all banned.

Pac may as well get involved.

So with two large steps, Pac stands right next to the boy.

Then he promptly grabs the boy's hair and yanks. The boy cries out in pain but Pac doesn't care. He shoves the boy towards Fit. Fit manages to get the cue quickly enough and clocks him in the face.

The boy goes sprawling to the ground with a thump and the girl screams, lunging from her spot on the ground in Fit's direction.

Without a second of hesitation Fit punches her in the face. She cries out, head snapping backwards as she whirls around to scratch at Fit's face. Fit manages to avoid it mostly, red lines appearing across his cheek.

Pac drives his knee into the boy's back, before checking his pockets for anything. He manages to pry some money out of the boy's pockets. He manages to grab a candybar and he manages to wrestle some sort of shiny stone out of his coat pocket.

When Pac looks up again, the girl is face down in the snow, blood trickling from her nose. She turns around to look at Fit, nothing but contempt and pure hatred on her face. She spits some blood out onto the snow.

Fit crouches down in front of her. "I'd recommend you not try and pick a fight with a runaway from Miller's Orphanage for Boys next time. I'm a lot nicer than some of the others — but not by much."

Pac doesn't know what *any* part of that means, but the girl's reaction seems to tell Pac enough. She goes pale, her eyes widening as she looks at Fit the way someone would a monster.

Fit drops the soup bowl into the snow next to her.

"Enjoy it."

And with that Fit turns on his heel, coat flying out behind him.

Pac scrambles to chase after him. He manages to scoop up his stuffed shark under his arm as he rushes through the snow to try and catch up.

Turns out Fit is a very fast walker than he's mad. Pac manages to catch up about twenty seconds later, puffing.

Fit gives him a glance. "You're still here?"

"Yeah?"

"After—" Fit glances over his shoulder at the two sibling who are still sprawled in the snow. "After that?"

"Yeah?" Pac doesn't stop to look at the siblings like Fit does. "Why?"

"I'm from Miller's?"

"I don't know what that means," Pac replies easily, shoving his hands in his pockets. He still has the shark tucked underneath his arm and has most of a soup bowl in his other hand even if it's cold.

He holds the bowl out in Fit's direction.

Fit rips a chunk off of it before shoving it in his mouth. It's the first time Pac's seen Fit do anything not calm. Fit must be ridiculously hungry.

Pac pushes the bread bowl and the leftover soup into Fit's hands. "You didn't *have* to give them your soup bowl."

Fit doesn't respond, he also doesn't really grip the bowl, just looking at Pac. "I don't want this."

"Too bad, you're hungry."

"I'm fine. I've gone longer."

"Not while I've been around," Pac returns. "You're not going to starve while I eat. We can both be hungry instead of one of us being… y'know, starving. Either we're both full or neither of us are full."

And Fit looks at him with an expression that Pac doesn't forget, all of these years later. It's the expression of someone who is starting to learn what kindness is. Fit looks truly baffled about the entire thing, his entire expression screams 'STAY AWAY FROM ME' but his mouth stays shut as he stares at the bread bowl loosely held in his hands.

"You're too good to me."

"I'm the amount of good you deserve," Pac gives Fit a smile, nudging his shoulder with their own.

They're both still kids, and Fit still has drying blood on his face. His knuckles are split and he looks like he's about to burst into tears at any moment glancing between the food and Pac. Fit's shoulders relax a little.

"Thank you…"

Pac throws his arm around Fit's shoulder. "It's what friends do!"

"You… became *friends* with them after that?" Tubbo can't help but laugh.

It sounds ridiculously like how Tommy met Ranboo and himself. Tommy basically fed them until they became friends. Then it was Tubbo, Ranboo and Tommy against the world. And now… they're all separated, with nothing but a sense of old loyalty to connect them.

Maybe they're not all that different from Ordo Theoritas.

Pac nods, a small laugh escaping his lips for the first time tonight. "We did— Cellbit was one of my closest friends, Bagi too— they were all my closest friends. It's a *little* bit funny how hard Fit beat them up that time."

"What does Miller's Orphanage mean?" Tubbo asks.

"Ah," Pac leans back on his bed. "I found that out *years* later. Fit isn't one who's very—" Pac waves his hands around. "Open with most of his feelings. I didn't want to ask him and he didn't want to tell. I found out later that uh, Miller's Orphanage is often where they send kids with powerful, but not yet developed powers. It also got shut down because of human rights violations so—"

The implications for what that means is more than enough. Tubbo opens and closes his mouth a few times before just blankly staring at Pac. "You guys have really sad lives— I mean you were fighting over *food* because you were both hungry."

"You never had to do that?"

"No."

And somehow, despite it all, Pac finds himself actually smiling. It's a bright thing, and Tubbo's stomach rolls with the uncomfortableness of it. Pac is smiling because children don't have to fight each other on the street to make sure they don't starve.

"I'm glad less kids go through that now."

"Me too." Tubbo says instead of screaming. "Wait— so you said Cellbit, Fit and Bagi were all kind of the defacto leaders of Ordo… how the fuck did that happen if Fit beat the shit out of them when you first met?"

Pac laughs, "because of my birthday."

"What?"

“On my twelfth birthday Fit wanted to find me a cake no matter the cost—”

Fit had a plan, and he’s not going to let anyone ruin it for love nor money. Since finding out this will be Pac’s first birthday without his family, Fit has decided to take this burden on himself. Fit’s never had a reason to care about his own birthday—

He has every reason to care about Pac’s.

Fit stomps into what he knows to be the Zeno twin’s stomping ground. At this point word around the street means that he now knows their names (Cellbit and Bagi Zeno) and he also knows that he has gained a good enough reputation of someone to be scared of.

Meanwhile, apparently Cellbit and Bagi have created some sort of empire for themselves in sharing messages around the city. They seem to get hired by drug dealers a lot. Fi has decided to feel nothing about that.

Their base of operations is in a run down broom closet in an apartment complex. It’s quite nice for a broom closet. They have a desk and a singular chair stuffed in the corner, along with various items strewn around the area. The room only has one hanging light from the roof which squeaks every time it moves at all.

From where Fit is standing at the door he can see Bagi’s back. She is hunched over something— a book or a piece of paper of some kind. Fit can’t see any sort of expression but her shoulders look tensed.

“We’re busy!” the semi-familiar voice yells out at him, clearly not having seen him yet.

“Be unbusy!” Fit calls back.

Bagi spins around, eyes going wide as she sees him. “Shit.” Then she moves onto swearing in Portuguese, something that Fit knows because of how much time he spends around Pac.

A gun is pointed at him and Fit rolls his eyes. “I’m not going to do anything. I want you to get something for me.”

“Cell!” Bagi calls over his shoulder. “Miller’s Murderer is here.”

Fit would almost be proud of that name if it wasn’t for the fact that Fit has literally never murdered anyone in his life. The closest he’s ever gotten to murder was a hazy memory from the orphanage when he was on the ground coughing blood.

Cellbit’s head whips around from a doorway that Fit didn’t see coming in.

Both of the twins do look healthier, their faces are fuller and their clothes don’t have moth bitten holes this time. Fit isn’t particular fond of either of these two— but he’s glad to see that the last five months have been kinder to them. He still wants all the Logstedchire Kids to do well— even if he dislikes them.

Then Cellbit starts swearing in Portuguese too.

Fit sighs.

He then slams two fifty dollar notes on the desk.

The tension in the room somehow doubles, as Cellbit and Bagi stare at the money now put on their rickety desk. One-hundred dollars is a lot when you have to get everything for free— one-hundred dollars can feed someone for months if they're smart about it.

"What the fuck?" Cellbit says, before his eyes come up to scan Fit's. "Where the fuck did you get this from?"

"Don't worry about it," Fit glances down at his hand, covered in bruises which he tucks behind his back. "I want you to get two things for me by tomorrow— you can either pay for them or steal them. I want you to get some sort of cake— ideally a candle. We have lighters. I also want you to try and get two books in Portuguese."

Both of them stare at him like he's actually, finally lost his mind.

"You're spending money on *that* ?" Bagi shrieks. "Instead of food or a new coat or better shoes or clothes for the summer—"

"We have everything we need for now," Fit says, and that is true.

The place they've set up is warm and abandoned. They have sleeping bags and mattresses and they have all the clothes they need. They have toothbrushes and places to shower and they finally— after months, have actual money for food. Their place might have running water if Fit can make it work.

It's near a library which entertains Pac most days.

They're good for now.

Fit wouldn't spend money uselessly, he hasn't had any of it for far too long to break himself out of that habit. But he does know that Pac misses Portuguese, he also knows that Pac misses cake. Particularly chocolate cake.

Apparently his mum used to make it on his birthday.

Fit doesn't want to replace any of these memories, he just wants Pac to feel better. The situation they're in has been shitty— it will keep being shitty until they die. Sometimes it's nice to eat cake and get books.

The twins look at the dollar bills on the desk. They look at each other. They look at Fit. Bagi snatches the notes off of the desk and tucks them into her pocket. "We can get them by tonight if you're willing to pay more."

"I'm not."

"Worth a try," Bagi says with a grin. "Preferred cake?"

“Not chocolate.”

“Got it,”

Cellbit is looking at Fit. This alone isn’t particularly weird, Cellbit has to look *somewhere.* The odd thing is how he’s looking at Fit. He’s looking at Fit with a mixture of confusion and something that’s nearly pride.

“I’ve never understood you,” Cellbit says, he props himself up on the counter. He leans forwards like by doing that he will be able to stare into Fit’s soul. “You are capable of a lot, you are capable of doing awful, terrible things. And all accounts say you do— but you also drop soup bowls for kids who haven’t eaten in so long they’ve started passing out. You drop money on the people who attack you.”

Fit bores his eyes into Cellbit. “I don’t enjoy this.” Fit glances at his bandaged knuckles. “I don’t *like* fighting but I do like living. I’ll do what I have to so I can survive. That’s all— no more, no less.”

“Unless Pac’s involved.”

The words feel harsher than any punch that has been thrown in Fit’s direction. The words knock the air out of his lungs. It’s something Fit hasn’t realised is true— something that he’s known down in his bones, but having it hit him in the chest like a punch makes it much harder to ignore.

Fit clenches his jaw. “So?”

“For a survivalist you’re going above and beyond,” Cellbit notes. “That’s all.”

“He’s my best friend.”

And he’s the brightest person that Fit has ever gotten to meet. Even having Pac orbiting in his life is the nicest thing Fit’s ever gotten to experience. Pac is bright and throws his arm around Fit’s shoulders, and they spend all night talking because they’ve never had to go to school early.

It’s just a nice thing to do.

Pac’s been miserable about his birthday, and that feels like a tragedy because Pac being born was one of the greatest things that’s happened to Fit’s world. That should be celebrated, always.

“Just get me the items, Zeno.”

Cellbit nods, but his face still has an expression on it that Fit doesn’t know how to examine. It seems somewhere between curiosity and— an upper hand. Fit doesn’t want to think about either of those things too hard.

“See you tomorrow,” Bagi says, her teeth looking sharper than normal.

Fit truly has no desire to be in this room for much longer. Fit crosses his arms across his chest and turns on his heel, walking out of the room as quickly as he can.

When he gets back to their little hideout Pac isn't there, which is fairly normal, Pac has spent a lot of time at the library recently. Their little area is in the attic of a factory— most of the factory workers have accepted that Pac and Fit are just a part of the job now.

They've started letting Fit and Pac use the interior stairs now, which means they don't have to scale the side of the wall anymore. The warmth from the giant furnaces keeps the room at a good temperature— it'll probably be unbearable in the summer but for now it's alright.

Above them is one big skylight, and a rickety wooden floor that the two of them put over the beams up here. Most of the floorboards are nailed in, but too often one of them has gotten incredibly close to tumbling to their death from the loose floorboards.

They now have a ladder leading from the top floor of the factory up here, and sometimes people bring them food— one time someone brought them an entire wardrobe they were going to throw out. So now they have somewhere to put their clothes.

Tucked into the corner is all of their stuff. There are the two mattresses they've dragged up here, along with the sleeping bags and small pile of blankets. Pac's stuffed shark is resting on his bed, along with a small pile of books by his bed. The wardrobe is slightly further away out of fear it'll fall through the dodgy floorboards.

Most of them seem to be some kind of anatomy textbooks, the sort of things the doctors read — not homeless children, but Fit doesn't want to spend too much time questioning Pac.

So Fit shrugs off his coat, chucking it on his bed. He then lays on top of his coat, reaching for the book by his side of the bed.

Unlike Pac, Fit only likes to have one book going at a time, it helps him focus better. Fit's reading isn't the best— he attended school but he always had other things going on which didn't involve school at all. His reading isn't the best but he's getting better.

Pac told him to read this book, so he is.

Fit doesn't think it's particularly interesting, but it gives him something to do.

An hour or so later, when Fit is most of the way through his book he hears the familiar sound of the ladder squeaking.

A few seconds later Pac's head pops over the edge of the ladder. He hauls himself onto the dodgy floorboards they've set up, and basically sprints across. He throws himself onto the bed next to Fit.

"You alright?"

Pac doesn't answer, but he does take Fit's hand in both of his own. Pac frowns at the bandages on Fit's hand, before starting to unwrap them.

If it was anyone else in the entire world Fit would shove them away, but because it's Pac he just watches. Pac unwraps the bandage with a surprising amount of care, being careful not to move Fit's hand too much.

Pac winces when he sees how torn up Fit's knuckles are.

"How'd you do this?"

"Got into a fight."

Pac sighs, he runs his fingers against all of the cuts and Fit squeezes his eyes shut.

"Can I try something?"

Fit doesn't open his eyes. This could mean Pac is going to rip out his stomach or Pac is going to give him a puppy. Fit wouldn't mind either as much as he'd pretend to. "Yeah."

"I haven't been going to the library," Pac says. "Well— I have. I've also been learning off this woman, Hayley. She's one of the healers at the hero tower— she's been training me. It's been very slow but…"

"You have powers?"

"Limited healing," Pac brings Fit's hand closer to his face. "The same as my mother. Can I try and heal your knuckles? Or make them hurt less— I've never tried it on someone who wasn't myself."

"Of course."

Fit keeps his eyes screwed shut for reasons he won't comprehend even years later. It feels like if Fit opens his eyes all of this can just disappear. Even months later Pac hasn't really felt like a person who is *real* .

People like this just don't exist.

Pac takes a deep breath, holding Fit's hands in his own. He lets out another gentle sigh, clasping Fit's hand tight enough that it almost hurts.

Then the feeling that dances through Fit's body is undeniable warmth, the feeling of sunlight through a window expands through Fit's hand where all the little aches and pains rest. The feeling of holding a warm hot chocolate, the feeling of a blanket on a cold day. The sensation that fills Fit's knuckles is familiar but so different. A fuzziness of warmth takes over and Fit wants to stay in that warmth forever.

With a soft gasp, Pac lets go of Fit's hand.

Fit's eyes shoot open, and his eyes immediately land on his knuckles. There are still red marks where the cuts had been, but they're otherwise closed up.

Pac stares at Fit's knuckles for a few seconds, hand over his mouth. Then he launches himself at Fit, his arms wrap around Fit's neck. For a few seconds Fit thinks Pac is going to try and choke him. Fit's entire body locks up before he realises what's happening—

A hug.

He's being hugged.

Pac's arms are wrapped around him, sending the same warmth through Fit's body as it did when Pac had healed his hand. It feels warm and safe and like everything Fit didn't know he wanted.

Slowly, bit by bit, Fit manages to relax his body. He has to manually relax his arms and legs and shoulders. He has to remind himself that he's safe— he's nothing but safe when Pac is around. Then he wraps his arms around Pac slowly, unsure where exactly to put them and how not to hug so tight that he hurts him.

"You're not going to hurt me," Pac whispers. "You can hug me tighter."

So Fit does.

It feels like home, and it feels like safety and it feels like everything that Fit hasn't been afforded before.

Pac doesn't let him go until Fit lets go.

That night Pac pushes their mattresses together and pulls out a bag of chips— it's a dumb purchase by almost every indicator. Chips aren't expensive but you can buy a lot of tinned things for that price.

Still, it's nice to sit on their now twice as big bed and talk about the world while eating chips that are salty and slightly greasy and hurt their mouth to eat too many of them unless they have a sip of water.

Pac turns thirteen when he's passed out, hand curled around the bag of chips like it's the most precious thing he's ever owned. Fit manages to pry the bag out of Pac's hand and tie it so that the chips won't go stale.

Fit goes to sleep a few moments later.

In the morning he writes the world's quickest note in his scratchy half legible writing. *Stay here! Back soon. Chips for breakfast? HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!!*

He leaves the note on his own pillow before rushing out of the factory as quickly as he can. The day shift of the workers aren't here yet, and Fit gives a few nods and smiles as he makes his way down to the ground floor.

The walk to the Zeno's is quiet. Fit half expects to see someone jump out at him because normally something goes wrong for Fit. Fit keeps his shoulders hunched and his eyes scanning for signs of everything.

His entire body is pent up as he makes his way through the streets of Logstedchire towards the dingy bottom floor of an apartment he's learning to know particularly well. The lobby doesn't even pretend to be nice, it has a couple of chairs and a reception area that is never staffed.

The only thing interesting is the glorified broom closet, on the outside of the door a piece of paper is sticky taped to the door saying 'ZENO SIBLINGS GATHERING SERVICE'.

Through the door Fit can hear them murmuring, he doesn't know Portuguese well enough to know any of what they're saying apart from a couple of swear words. He knocks on the door twice before pulling it open.

The alleged office is very small.

Fit knocks on the wall a few times, and the Zeno twins are thrown out of their conversation. Both of them turn to look at Fit.

"I told you," Cellbit says and Fit notes that he's using English. He wants Fit to know whatever he is saying.

Fit's skin prickles at that, but he looks at the two of them expectantly.

Bagi sighs, reaching underneath the counter and pulling out a stack of books. There are two rather thick books. On top of that Cellbit places one of those shitty supermarket cakes, which are secretly very good.

They all look at the stash.

Bagi looks at the small pile of items, then back up at Fit again, then back down at the items. "You really care about him, huh?" There's a smile on her face that Fit doesn't like— it doesn't seem to be plotting it just seems— mischievous.

Fit just looks at her for a few moments. "Of course I do?"

"Would you say he's your best friend? Your roommate?"

Cellbit slaps her in the arm, before giving Fit a short smile. "You can leave now— tell Pac we said happy birthday."

"We barely know him." Bagi says.

Cellbit slaps her in the arm again.

Bagi slaps him in the arm so hard that Cellbit cries out and holds where she hit, looking at her with wide, betrayed eyes. Cellbit starts hopping around from the pain, muttering under his breath as he holds his arm.

"See you around!"

Fit leaves without another word. He remains largely uninterested in watching siblings fight. He's seen a lot of people fight in his life— the only people he is afraid of watching fight are siblings. They try to kill each other one second and then the next second they're trying to kill *other* people for their siblings.

He is far beyond understanding siblings, nor does he want to.

Fit keeps glancing at everyone who passes him on the way back to the loft. (Calling it the loft feels a bit kind, but it makes him feel slightly better about the entire thing.) He has books and a cake which he is hauling around.

Somehow Fit doesn't get stopped on the way back to the loft. He gets a few weird looks from people who recognise him but no one decides it's worth messing with him today.

He slips back into the factory, giving someone a nod and scampering upstairs to go and find Pac.

Pac's eyes go wide as Fit shuffles up the ladder and thunks the books onto the floor.

Fit hauls himself over the ladder.

For a moment the pair of them just look at each other. Pac glances at the books and the cake resting precariously on top of the books. Nothing is wrapped— Fit maybe should've wrapped them. Gifts seem better when they're wrapped, right?

"Uh—" Fit shuffles forwards, careful to try not to fall through all of the floorboards. "I know it's not much but—"

He kneels on the floor next to Pac's bed, dropping the books onto the bed.

"I'm sorry they're not wrapped—"

Pac reaches over the books to wrap his arms around Fit's shoulders. Fit feels his body relax into it in a way it never used to do. Pac pulls him closer and Fit doesn't resist it, letting Pac drag him so they're both precariously balanced on the bed.

"There's also a cake— it isn't chocolate— I didn't know if—"

Pac hugs Fit tighter. "Fit?"

"Yeah?"

"Shut up about the cake and let me hug you."

"Okay."

The cake is good— Pac enjoys the books and he enjoys reading them to Fit in a pretentious voice. He enjoys blowing out a candle for the fun of it and eating straight into the cake with a spoon.

However, the best part is spending the day with Pac.

Neither of them leave their little safe space from the world, they spend the day eating their leftover chips and cake. They spend the day where everything is nice and safe and nothing can hurt them—

If Fit could, he'd live in that day forever.

"You're not friends there…" Guqqie says slowly.

And Fit knows he has to tell the full story— the story of Ordo Theoritas doesn't make sense if he *doesn't* explain this part. He knows he has to, but this part sucks and is awful and he *knows* that's the point… but still.

How is he supposed to explain the pure terror of all of it? How is he supposed to explain the bone deep horror when they all realised exactly what was starting to happen— what the Hero Committee were going to do to them?

Fit sighs. He runs both of his hands down his face.

"Fit?" a small voice says.

The voice drags him out of his own head. It's small and gentle and concerned and Fit can feel his heart melt away because of it.

Fit whips around to see Ramón standing in the archway that connects the living room and the kitchen. Ramón shuffles on his feet a little, his eyes scanning over the two new people in their house. He's still in his banana pajamas, and he looks very cute with his bed hair sticking up in all directions.

"Yes, my boy?" Fit immediately stands, heading towards his son. He crouches down so he can get on eye-level with him. It's something he started as soon as Richas learnt to walk even before he was capable of talking.

Ramón shuffles, eyes darting back and forth between Guqqie and Aimsey and Fit. "Why are strangers in our house so early? You say that it's bed time— you're not in bed." He pouts, his little face twisting up into an upset expression.

He's genuinely concerned that they're not in bed. And *wow* Fit sometimes forgets how sweet all of his kids can be when they're not trying to rip out each other's hair.

"Hmm, that generally applies to little kids," Fit whispers. "We're all adults— and sometimes adults need to stay awake to talk about important things."

"Like what?" Ramón sways back and forth from foot to foot, a mischievous expression immediately appearing on his face.

Fit sighs. He knows he can't explain most of his childhood to Ramón yet. All of them are too young to really understand all of it, and Fit doesn't want to give any of them nightmares. But

Ramón also has a right to know.

“I can’t tell you all of it now,” Fit brings his hand up to Ramón’s hair to ruffle it, and Ramón shrieks with laughter. “Because it’s a little bit scary and I don’t want to scare you. Have you ever wondered how Cellbit and I met?”

Ramón nods. “Why does Richas live with us if he’s Cellbit’s son?”

“That’s a very complicated question, my boy,” Fit says with a sigh. “Cellbit is often very busy with work. And I think Richas is also my son in every way that really matters.”

Ramón nods. “How did you and Cellbit meet?”

Fit sighs, scooping Ramón up into his arms. Ramón accepts his fate of being carried the way Fit carried them all when they were babies. Fit is still strong enough to do it for now, and Ramón gets comfortable in Fit’s arms.

“Well,” Fit glances at Aimsey and Guqqie.

Both of them are watching the interaction quietly. Guqqie has a million questions on her face, and Aimsey, as always, is just silently observing the entire thing. Aimsey’s eyes are slightly narrowed as they look at how comfortable Ramón is in Fit’s arms.

If either of them thought he was putting on an act because they were there— it’s a bit harder to believe that now.

“Cellbit tried to steal food off of me and one of my friends. We’d met a couple of times afterwards— and then something quite scary happened to me and some other people… so my friend and Cellbit had to work together.”

“What happened?” Ramón asks.

Fit doesn’t even know how to start explaining *what happened* to someone this young. He knows he wasn’t that much older than Em and Richas when it actually happened, but at that point it just felt… normal.

He hums, rocking Ramón a little bit and Ramón is beyond accepting his fate.

Ramón leans his head against Fit’s chest, listening to his heart.

Fit glances over at Aimsey and Guqqie. “Well, I had been very, very poor at the time. However, I wanted money y’know. Wanted that sweet, sweet green paper.”

That makes Ramón giggle, burying his head against Fit’s chest.

“So— back in my day, a very easy way to make money was by fighting other people.”

“That seems dumb.”

“It was a little bit.”

“Did you lose?”

“Sometimes,” Fit says. “And one day— they thought me and some other people were *so* good at fighting that they didn’t want to let us leave. They wanted to make us stronger so we could bring more money for them.”

Ramón’s tiny brow furrows and he looks up at Fit. “That seems silly.”

Fit glances over at Aimsey and Guqqie. Both of them seem to realise the reality of the situation. Aimsey in particular has wider eyes as they look at Fit. The gaps have been filled in the way that they can’t be for a child for now.

Fighting rings and blue.

“It was a little bit silly, my boy— it really was.”

When Pac wakes up one morning and Fit isn’t in the room he tries not to think much of it. There isn’t a lot to think about. Fit could be anywhere— and it’s not like they’re always with each other at all times.

Pac spends a lot of time in one of the hospitals, Fit spends a lot of time—

Pac doesn’t really know.

He does know sometimes Fit comes back covered in bruises and cuts and Pac has to hold his hands over the worst of the injuries and heal them. Pac always has so many questions to ask, but he never does.

In the time they’ve lived together, not once has Pac managed to learn any more about Fit by pushing him for answers. Fit’s a bit like a cat in that way— he comes to people in their own time.

He also headbutts people.

Sometimes with affection but mostly to break people’s noses.

Pac rolls out of bed.

Long have they abandoned the Factory Loft (what they’ve now decided to call it years after they left). They’ve managed to secure a tiny apartment for almost nothing every week. The bedroom only really has enough room for a bed, which Fit and Pac normally share.

There’s a tiny kitchen, bathroom with black mould nearly dripping from the wall. And most importantly they’ve found room to put a table and a bookshelf in the room. While they mostly don’t own the books that go on the bookshelves (mostly library books, they have a few from when they’ve decided they deserve them or from free library giveaways.)

Still, it’s warm in the winter and cool in the summer.

Pac can't complain too much.

He trudges out of the bedroom into the kitchen where he starts scrounging for anything to eat. They have cereal but no milk, so Pac just picks up the box and starts shovelling handfuls of cereal into his mouth.

A knock out of the door drags him out of his cereal frenzy.

Pac pauses, hand halfway to his mouth.

There's another knock on the door, more frantic this time.

Pac stays very still for a few seconds.

"PAC!" Cellbit's voice yells through the door. "Open this door right now or I'm going to beat you to death—"

Alrighty then.

Pac drops the cereal box onto the counter and takes about five steps across the entire length of the apartment and swings the door open.

Standing in front of him is a dishevelled looking Cellbit. He looks like a— odd paintbrush except the paintbrush has bags under his eyes and also looks like he's been crying. There are red splotches on his face and his eyes are still teary.

Standing next to Cellbit is a girl that Pac has never seen before in his life. She's taller than him, with dark brown hair and eyes. At the end of her hair there are small bits of teal that look like they're fading quickly. The most striking thing about the girl is the two yellow wings that she has poking out from the baggy t-shirt she's wearing. More importantly, the girl looks just as devastated as Cellbit. She has large bags under her eyes and redness around the rims of her eyes.

Pac glances between the two of them. "Are you two alright?"

"Where's Fit?" Cellbit says.

"Uh—" Pac checks over his shoulder. "I dunno— I don't exactly— have a tracker on him."

"Did he come home last night?" the girl asks.

"I— I don't know?" Pac glances through the open door into their bedroom. Fit's side is messed up like the sheets have been slept in— but Fit is messy, he almost never makes his bed. Pac would know if Fit didn't come home *right?*

He'd know if his best friend didn't come home—

But there's enough doubt about it that Pac can barely think. He doesn't know if Fit did shuffle in last night, if he put his coat over the back of the chair at night and left in the morning. Pac spends a few long seconds looking between Cellbit and the girl.

“Why?” Pac asks.

“Do you know how Fit’s been making money?” Cellbit steps into the room, dragging the girl in with him.

And no. Pac doesn’t. Like so many things in their life, Pac has a million questions but he doesn’t ask any of them because he doesn’t want to scare Fit off. He knows maybe he should ask more questions— about Fit and what he does all day, but he also trusts Fit to come to him if anything gets bad.

Maybe he shouldn’t have trusted Fit that much.

Pac shakes his head, and Cellbit’s expression scrunches up.

“Ring fighting.”

For a second Pac can barely think about *what* that means, his head turns into nothing but static that seems to ring in his head. The idea that Fit has been letting himself get beat up for money is ridiculous and dumb and—

Sounds about right. The bruises and the cuts and the pains that Pac’s been healing without knowing why and without asking questions. It makes sense and Pac hates that it makes sense because then he’s just been stupid— and he hasn’t seen what was clearly in front of him.

Of *course* Fit would do that, of *course* Pac wouldn’t see or ask about it. Pac never asks about anything and Fit never tells him anything— it’s how it’s gone. It’s been effective and fine and Pac wants to rip his hair out of his head.

“They took Bagi,” Cellbit says.

Pac’s mouth falls open, he can’t help it.

“They took Jaiden’s friend…” Cellbit says, glancing at the girl standing next to him.

“I thought— perhaps they’d heard something,” the girl, Jaiden, speaks up for the first time. She has the tone of someone who has been crushed. Her voice is quiet and she doesn’t look Pac in the eyes. “Everyone knows the Zeno twins know everything that goes on and…”

Pac turns to look at Cellbit with wide eyes. “Why would they—”

“I don’t know,” Cellbit whispers. His eyes turn into something more determined and brutal, they turn into something with contempt and hatred and for a few seconds Pac is almost afraid of what Cellbit can turn himself into. “I do know… we need to find them. We’re *going* to find them. There’s no other option.”

Jaiden nods, her eyes settling into something determined.

Pac just looks between the two of them. “Are you mad?” he shrieks, “how are we supposed to stop this giant operation— if they took our friends and your sister there has to be a reason. We don’t know where they’re kept or what the motive is or— it’s a suicide mission.”

“You particularly want to live in a world where Fit isn’t around?” Cellbit bites back.

It cuts at Pac like a knife. Cellbit has reached into Pac’s soul and rifled around in there with only a few simple sentences. It physically aches at Pac’s chest at the realisation of it— because no, he doesn’t want to live in a world where Fit isn’t in his life.

And that infuriates him.

It infuriates him that Cellbit saw it, just like that.

“You know he’d do the same for you,” Cellbit says. “He’s in this situation because of you.”

It could have so easily been an accusation— but it isn’t one from Cellbit. It’s just an acceptance of the facts, Fit will always do reckless things to look after both of them and Pac will do everything in his power to stitch up the wounds afterwards.

“I didn’t ask him to do this for me.”

“And you didn’t have to. The same way he would never ask you to risk your life to find him.”

Pac grits his teeth, he looks at Jaiden and he looks at Cellbit. He stares down at his socks with silly patterns on them— socks that Fit got him for Christmas.

He looks back up at Cellbit, an unsettling calm filling his body. “What do we have to do?”

“The fighting rings didn’t always— take people?”

Pac shakes his head, still hugging his legs. He takes a deep breath. “Housing people is expensive, you know? They didn’t want to do it until they needed a reason to do it and… they found a reason to do it.”

Tubbo blinks at Pac slowly, “huh?”

“Blue.” Pac’s entire body shudders. “The heroes found someone to test blue on.”

“The heroes? Hadn’t blue testing been going on for years at this point.”

“On people like Bad, yes. Not like this— not like—” Pac’s entire body shudders again as he screws his eyes shut. He takes a deep breath. “It was bad, Tubbo. I know it’s bad now, I know it was bad before this. We don’t think blue had been tested like this before— not when people were fighting for their lives. Not with this capacity.”

Tubbo just looks at Pac for a few seconds. “My best friends have both been— well one of them has just been drugged with it. The other one got blued. I don’t know if I get it the way you do, but I’ve seen it.”

And

“I uh— used to work at one,” Tubbo confesses and he’s not really sure why. “I was like thirteen and I’d just run away from home. Flew across the Atlantic and ended up in L’Manberg. I wasn’t even born here… I was born in England. And— it was easy work and it was good money and I didn’t really know what I was doing.”

Pac just tilts his head at Tubbo, he doesn’t say anything and in the suffocating silence it feels like Tubbo is choking under the weight of it. It feels judgemental and wrong and Tubbo needs to justify a past he’s been trying to forget.

“I didn’t know,” he says again, “I— I thought— I don’t know what I thought. I might not have cared. I saw one of the kids… and he looked—” Tubbo shuffles on his bed like that does anything, he fluffs out his pillows and moves his weight so he’s leaning back on his other arm. “I dunno. I guess it didn’t feel real until I saw it. The worst part is the blank—”

“Look in someone’s eyes,” Pac finishes. “Like they’re seeing straight through you.”

Tubbo nods.

He remembers the most clearly how Ranboo looked— Ranboo was one of the kids, brutal and good at what they did and with sharp claws and teeth and a drive to survive that Tubbo has not understood since.

And Tubbo knows that Ranboo’s memory loss largely stems from how often he had blue stabbed into the side of his neck and he knows Ranboo doesn’t remember *why* they ran from the fighting rings, only that they did.

Tubbo remembers all of it. He remembers the shy teenager who offered half of his shitty lunch rations and he remembers how quickly that would switch from quiet and shy to a murderer at the hands of this bright blue liquid.

He remembers all of it.

“Tubbo?”

Tubbo glances up, shaking himself out of the memory of crazed eyes and blood on Ranboo’s teeth. He glances down at his own arm for a few seconds, familiar scars of claws that had raked across his arm.

With a sigh, Tubbo rubs his face. “Yeah, sorry?”

“Are you alright?”

“I hate blue,” Tubbo says. He thinks of the two people who ever mattered the most in the world to him— Tommy and Ranboo and how both of their lives had been irrevocably shattered by it. How Tommy’s confession of what happened to him was on a Monday night as he tried not to cry— how Tubbo never told Ranboo everything and Ranboo never asked.

He misses them.

It’s dumb, he knows it’s dumb.

Missing them won't change anything. Still, he does it anyway.

Pac just gives him a gentle look. "I think we all do. Everyone involved needs to die."

"They will."

It's not a promise because both of them know that promising something like that is stupid and childish and will do nothing. To Tubbo it feels more like a declaration, a matter of facts, everyone involved with blue existing in the world *will* die.

"What happened to the others?" Tubbo asks. "What happened to you guys?"

"I don't— uh know *all* the details about what happened to Fit and Bagi and the rest of them. But I know that—"

Fit wakes up with his arms by his side and his tongue heavy in his mouth. Everything aches like a bad bruise. He goes to turn over to Pac, to ask him to stop Fit's entire body from aching like this.

He manages to roll slightly before going to rub at his eyes. His hand strains against some kind of metal against his wrist, and panic immediately floods Fit's entire body as he whips his head around to look at his wrist.

The room is not his room— it is a room with bright overhead lights and a series of beds littered around the room, also with people in them but Fit can't focus on any of them. He stares at the metal cuff around his wrist. It's attached to the railing of the bed and for a moment all Fit can do is just stare at it.

Fit strains against the metal, before making a noise of pain in the back of his throat when nothing gives and his wrist just feels like it's on fire. He leans his head back onto the pillow before taking a deep breath.

His memory comes back in unravelled threads, lots of yelling and punches being thrown. Bagi had been there at some point, more people had too— then Fit remembers something thunking into his head and the feeling of slipping in and out of consciousness.

Taking them makes no sense—

Fit looks to his left.

Sure enough there is a familiar enough mop of split dyed hair, blonde and brown as Bagi turns to her right and looks at Fit. Her expression both relaxes and gets more panicked, her eyes widening and she lurches forwards before being stopped by the metal cuff around her wrist.

"Fit?" she hisses. "I thought you ran—"

"Evidently so did I," Fit hisses back. "What the fuck happened?"

“I don’t know!” Bagi grimaces as she tries to look around the room. “They have a bunch of orphans I don’t fucking know why. It—” she breaks off into Portuguese in a rapid manner which is honestly impressive and Fit half understands Portuguese at this point.

She’s just murmuring swear words.

Which… seems fair all things considered.

Fit sighs, leaning backwards against the pillow as he tries to think about what the everloving fuck he should do here. Being kidnapped by a fighting ring can’t mean anything good, but Fit can’t do anything about it yet.

If he had a chance to use his powers then he would— but Fit doubts there’s going to be a massive body of water nearby, and he doesn’t trust himself with blood nearly enough to try anything with that.

If Fit can make himself bleed then maybe he can do something with that?

There’s the noise of footsteps, and Fit whips his head to the side so quickly something in his neck twinges. The chatter and panic in the room turns completely silent as everyone tries to see whoever this is.

Fit can’t see much but a slither of brown hair and the side of what looks like a white lab coat of some kind. Fit looks away from the figure and towards Bagi. Bagi’s mouth is pressed into a thin line and she’s clearly thinking about *something* .

He tilts his head at her.

Bagi shakes her head, but immediately goes back into that thinking expression.

There’s the crackle of a speaker. “You are all going to be released from your binds. From there you are going to head to the white door. Comply or else.”

What the fuck is happening?

The cuff around his wrist deattaches and Fit shoots upright. His eyes scan around the room— there are maybe ten beds in here or so, all of them have different people in them. Fit vaguely recognises some from fighting ring matches.

Most of them are teenagers—

There’s maybe one adult.

Fit… is not very fond of that. He scowls as he looks around. The room looks like it used to be a storeroom, they still have shelves across the walls that have been emptied. The floor and walls are concrete—

They’re probably in some kind of basement just based on the patterning of the walls and floors. Fit can’t hear any noises of cars or residual noise from above— it either means

everything has been sound proofed, they're quite far underground or they're in a relatively isolated location.

Fit's feet hit the ground. He's in the same clothes he had been in before, these clothes are bloodier and more of a mess than they had been but are generally holding up okay. He doesn't have any shoes, and instead can only see his socks littered with holes.

A few kids are ushering themselves to the door, looking around wildly like they're confused about it.

Bagi scrambles from her bed around next to Fit. "I need your blood." She says, like that's a normal thing to say at all.

"Huh?"

"I need your blood— my powers activate through blood. I need your blood."

"Uh—"

Bagi doesn't hesitate for much longer, she runs a sharp fingernail across Fit's hand. Fit yelps in pain, but Bagi grabs his arm with her other hand. She holds it there as she waits for some blood to pool on his arm.

The blood pools in a tiny droplet. Bagi presses her finger into it, before putting her finger in her mouth.

"The fuck—"

"Oh! Water manipulation," Bagi says with a smile. "Thanks—"

"The fuck—"

Bagi presses on ahead to where people are starting to slowly filter out of the door. Fit takes off behind her because *what the fuck was that?* He's heard of blood activated powers but what the everloving fuck is happening with that.

She just *ate his blood.*

Fit has many feelings about that, and most of them are not particularly good.

He steps through the doorway. The space in front of them is a long hallway with various flickering lights on either sides of the walls. Fit wants to say a thousand things, most of them along the lines of *WHAT THE FUCK* but instead he keeps his mouth clamped shut.

Any concern he has over Bagi dies in his throat as he sees the hallway.

Something about this is organised enough that Fit feels a rising panic in the back of his throat. He opens and closes his mouth a few times as Bagi turns around to look at him with wide, terrified eyes. This is too organised—

Organisation normally means security, it means countermeasures and it means premeditation. It means they're fucked— more fucked than Fit thought they were. His body tenses up as he sees the same man from before having moved down the hallway.

The herd of children shoved into this hallway start moving forwards slowly, walking towards the man at the other end of the hallway. The stupid fucking man at the end of the hallway that Fit wants to kill more than anything.

One of the kids gets pushed— just jostled, there was never any malicious intent as far as Fit knows. There's a noise of laughter, pure glee as someone grabs this kid.

This kid is clearly the youngest here— Fit doesn't get a lot of time to look at the kid, but he knows that he is either malnourished or younger than the rest of them… or both. The kid immediately yells something in panic.

Fit is pushing forwards before he can stop himself. He shoves past someone his age with dark brown hair and a scrap of fabric holding his hair off of his face. He moves towards whatever person has grabbed the kid.

"Oi!" Someone yells at Fit. Fit doesn't know if it's another kid or one of the adults in charge here, but he doesn't care either way.

Fit doesn't hesitate, he manages to pry the boy out of their grip and glance at him quickly. Light brown hair, clunky glasses and wide confused eyes.

"This is interesting…" the man from earlier says, stalking forwards out of the darkness towards the now huddled group of teenagers. The man himself looks— ghastly is the only way Fit can really describe it.

He is tall and thin, with lanky limbs which look like they lack muscle or fat hanging off of them. This man looks like only bones, his face is gaunt, with blackened areas for cheeks which have collapsed into his face slightly. His cheekbones are sharp due to the skinniness in his face. He has dark brown hair that flies in all directions around his head, it seems no effort has been made to contain it at all.

He's still in that white lab coat, it however seems to dwarf him.

Fit knows he could beat this man in a fight without hesitation, he also knows he wouldn't be able to take the small collection of guard figures around them. He might be able to take one or two— he wouldn't be able to take them all.

He clenches his jaw, looking up at the man.

And Fit knows he should be scared— but he refuses to be scared of a man like this.

The man's mouth turns up into a slight smile. "And who might you be?"

"You don't care," Fit says.

The man laughs slightly. “We’ll take him and the boy first. You should learn very quickly that your effort is wasted on trying to help other people.”

Fit spits in the man’s face.

He’s grabbed immediately. Four people seize him straight away. His shoulders and arms are gripped immediately by harsh hands. Fit keeps his mouth shut so he doesn’t make a noise of pain as someone digs their thumb into his collarbone.

With a remarkable amount of calmness considering the situation, Fit keeps his eyes on the man in front of him.

He hears some noises of struggle behind him, but the second Fit tries to turn his head around to see what’s happening behind him, someone's hand jabs into his neck and Fit keeps his head straight ahead.

He’s dragged into a room down the hall, a completely empty room and Fit glances around for anything. There’s not even a chair— it’s just an empty room with a door on it. It doesn’t look like a prison or anything. The only thing that gives away any slight intent is the wooden door having a pane of glass on it.

“Huh?” Fit says.

“This’ll hurt for a few moments.” The man from earlier says.

Then pain shoots throughout Fit’s entire neck and he screams. The arms immediately let go of him, and Fit falls onto his knees as his body starts trying to rip itself apart. The pain is the worst thing Fit’s ever felt.

Every part of his body is immediately on fire, starting at his neck and spreading out. It burns and stabs and Fit collapses forwards, leaning his head against the floor as he tries to keep himself upright.

It strikes through him like a fire burning through a house. He loses awareness of anything happening around him— this building could be on fucking fire and Fit wouldn’t know from the pain that’s lacing his entire body.

He’s pretty sure he’s screaming— he doesn’t even know if he’s screaming. He knows he’s crying in a way he hasn’t since he was very young. He can feel the tears on his cheeks because it’s a relief from feeling nothing but pain.

He gasps for breath as his hands curl into fists on the floor. He hits his hand on the floor to feel *anything* but this bone deep pain. It burns through his body, it burns through his stomach. Every vein in his body is on fire, ripping itself apart and stitching itself back together before tearing itself apart again.

His stomach twists and something deep in the back of his mind screams at him. It screams at him but over the pain Fit doesn’t know what he’s supposed to know. Fit just knows the feeling of destruction.

He wants to tear the entire world apart. Anything that's allowed this to happen to him— he wants to rip it apart and inflict half the pain that Fit is feeling currently on it. He wants to tear something apart— he wants to taste blood in his mouth and underneath his fingernails and—

He throws up.

It splatters on the ground and Fit looks at the chunks.

Fit curls around himself, hugging his stomach as he lurches from the pain.

Every vein in his body is ripping itself apart and tearing itself back together. Everything hurts and *fuck* it hurts and Fit knows he's crying— he might be screaming but none of it matters because the pain is clouding everything.

It rips and rips and Fit can feel how his muscles rip and he can feel how his heart rate gets faster and faster and it hurts so badly and he just wants Pac here. Something leaves his mouth and he thinks it's vomit but he doesn't know.

He lands flat on his stomach, curling up as if that's going to make it stop hurting.

For a few moments Fit just stays on his stomach trying to keep his breathing as even as possible. His vision shudders and Fit uses all the strength he has to keep himself awake— whatever they stabbed him with is not good for him and Fit is *not* going to be unconscious while in a strange fucking laboratory like this.

Everything aches.

Fit doesn't know if people can die just from pain, but he's pretty sure he's going to. His stomach and throat want to tear out of his body, Fit brings his hands up to his throat with the hope of alleviating the pain even a little bit.

If he can get another pain to focus on maybe he can—

He digs his fingernails into his throat.

There's a noise that doesn't come from him and Fit suddenly has two hands wrapped around Fit's wrists, pulling his hands away from his own throat.

"Hi…" a quiet voice says, and Fit manages to look up.

Kneeling in front of him is the boy from earlier.

He has glasses that are too big for his face which are taped around the middle, light brown hair flies out in all directions around his head with hair that's in between curly and straight. He's wearing a baggy green hoodie which has stains of blood and puke on it.

The thing that makes Fit stare though is the threads of slime that seem to be sticking clumps of his hair together.

"Huh?" Fit manages.

“I’m Charlie,” the boy says with a slightly awkward laugh. “I think we’re going to see a lot of each other.”

“What does—” Fit is pretty sure he has more to say but he throws up again, this time there’s nothing *to* throw up so it’s nothing but bile and stomach acid. He chokes around the taste of it, trying to keep himself upright so he doesn’t fall into his own vomit.

He tips forwards, and the boy surges forwards at the same time.

He puts both hands on Fit’s shoulders, keeping him against the wall so he doesn’t fall into his own vomit.

“You’re gonna be fine, man. Just breathe.”

“What the fuck is—” again, Fit is pretty sure he has more thoughts but that’s interrupted by the feeling of vomit rising in his throat again. He clamps his mouth shut and breathes through his nose as deeply as he can.

Charlie seems to know what he means. “Oh! The weird shit they injected you with? No clue.”

That’s incredibly fucking helpful, thank you child. Is what Fit would say if he didn’t feel like he was going to throw up as soon as he opens his mouth. Instead, he groans at Charlie and Charlie seems to be a bit sympathetic.

He pats Fit on the head a few times.

If it was literally any other time Fit would pummel this kid into a pulp. In fact, he still thinks about doing it as he stares up at Charlie trying not to resent him and everything he stands for. He scowls for a few more seconds before leaning back against the wall.

“They didn’t inject me with anything.” Charlie says remarkably cheerfully considering the circumstances.

Fit just turns his head to look at him. “What’s the— purpose—”

He throws up again.

Charlie grimaces, taking a few steps to the side. “That’s really gross, man.”

“Sorry—” Fit wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. He takes a deep breath as he keeps his breathing even. Everything is hurting less— it feels more like a dull ache rather than something that’s going to rip his entire body apart.

He turns his head up to look at Charlie again. “Are you okay?”

Charlie looks at him like Fit has actually lost his mind— Fit distinctly feels like he *has* lost his mind, so maybe that works. “Me? I’m— I’m good.”

“Awesome.”

Fit careens forwards again, Charlie makes a noise trying to catch Fit the best he can. His best isn't very good, and Fit ends up half laying in his own vomit. Fit doesn't even particularly care, he has more than enough going on in his life right now.

Charlie winces as he sits down next to Fit. "Sorry."

"You're good."

"So…" Charlie trails off. "What's your name?"

"Fit."

"That *can not* be real."

"It is."

"Jinkies."

Fit turns his head very slowly to look at Charlie.

Charlie is so obviously young it makes Fit want to do something drastic to everyone who is allowing this to happen. His cheeks still have baby fat on them and his voice is so obviously that of a child's.

"How old are you?" Fit asks.

"Uh— almost thirteen."

And Fit is almost sixteen— by no accounts is he *old* compared to Charlie. Twelve is *so young.* Twelve is when he was trying to make his way through the world with Pac by his side, twelve is when everything started getting better.

Here Charlie is, this kid locked in a room with him for reasons that Fit isn't even starting to understand. They're all so young— this is some fucking bullshit. They're all children and that thought creates a similar sense of rage well up in Fit's stomach.

Then he's mad about everything— mad about the circumstances of his birth, mad about being an orphan. Mad that he's living in a world where he was allowed to be homeless when he was so young. Angry that Pac's family got what they did— they all seemed like perfectly nice people.

Fit's just angry, and he doesn't know where the fuck he is supposed to put this anger at the injustice of it all.

The same man from before walks back into the room. He looks between Fit and Charlie and his mouth curls into a frown. "Huh." He says. "You have high metabolism."

Fit just looks up as slowly as he can, he lets every part of contempt he has show on his face. He half wants to rip this person's throat out with his fucking teeth. He wants to tear someone apart and he is the one closest who deserves it.

“No worries— we’ll figure it out soon enough.”

Only eight people return back to the room full of beds.

As soon as Ramón falls asleep Fit starts explaining some of the details. Just in a quiet tone, still trying to be careful just in case Ramón isn’t actually asleep. He says enough that Aimsey’s eyes go wide as Fit explains being jabbed in the neck with blue.

Ramón snores, and Fit runs his fingers through his hair.

“When did you adopt him?” Guqqie asks.

“You don’t get to just know everything,” Fit whispers. “You get to know things relating to Ordo Theoritas.”

“He isn’t related to Ordo Theoritas?”

Everything in Fit’s life is related to Ordo eventually— everything circles back around to them. Ramón is one of the few things that isn’t related to Ordo Theoritas. Ramón is— one of the best decisions Fit has ever made and one of the most beautiful, compassionate people alive that Fit has ever gotten to meet. Let *alone* get the privilege to watch grow up.

So Fit shakes his head.

“The other two are?”

Fit nods. “I was never supposed to be the one raising them. I’m… so glad I am, I just wish it didn’t have to come at the expense of… everything.”

“And Pac…” Aimsey says slowly. “What was your relationship with him?”

The anger that burns in Fit’s gut is something that Fit has known since he was young. He knows these two are young, and he knows they don’t really understand the grief and regret that has become so interwoven with Pac that Fit scarcely remembers a time when he didn’t feel guilt about Pac.

He knows they’re young and it’s not their fault—

Still, they do not get to come into his house and see his children and be told *everything.* They do not get to pry into Fit’s personal relationships, they do not get to examine Fit’s grief with anything but concern about how that impacted Ordo Theoritas.

“You get to know about things that affected Ordo Theoritas— you don’t get to pry into my personal life and relationships more than you already have. Whatever my relationship with Pac was it didn’t fucking matter because nothing changed— none of it ever fucking mattered because he’s gone and I’m still the one left. Some things were just between us— and you don’t get to go fucking rifling around in my heart. You get to know what Ordo Theoritas was and why we fucking tried to rip the world apart.”

Guqqie and Aimsey just stare at him with wide eyes. In Aimsey's hand there are wisps of red energy getting ready to strike at him.

Fit clenches his jaw. "We found out the hero tower was funding the fighting rings— we found out they were testing on us to see what blue did to someone's powers and how they performed in a fight. We found out that the one institution we thought we could believe us would throw us at the wall like fucking canon fodder and I would spend the rest of my life trying to burn it all down."

"The rest of your…"

"You think there was no reason I took the Purpled case?" Fit snaps. "You think I just did that without thought— if Purpled dies, Theseus comes back. If Theseus comes back things will change because they *have* to change. As much as I wished to fucking burn it all down when I was his age he's the only one with half the power to do it. Frame Elysium and force them to talk— either Theseus destroys Elysium or comes out with an allyship with them. Either way he is someone who the heroes will have to negotiate with."

Fit leans back on the couch, checking to see if Ramón is still asleep. Somehow he is. Snoring softly as Fit takes a deep breath.

"You don't get to know everything."

"Got it," Guqqie says. She glances at Aimsey. Aimsey gives Fit a long look.

For a second it feels like Aimsey just *knows* all of it. That they just understand everything Fit's been through— Fit would guess Aimsey had some kind of empathy power if Fit hadn't just interacted with someone who actually has an empathy power.

Fit bites the inside of his cheek.

"You loved him though, right?" Aimsey says gently. "It doesn't matter how— you loved him, right? You loved all of them—"

"What does that matter?"

"Because love being there matters. Having loved the people around you matters— sometimes in difficult times people think they're above love. You met your people in Ordo Theoritas, didn't you? People who were messy and not necessarily good— but they were yours and you were theirs."

Fit nods. "Yeah— bound by trauma and hatred for the systems that allowed us to meet each other."

Aimsey smiles. "I'm glad you and Pac found each other, it sounded like you really needed each other when you did find each other."

Fit doesn't say how he thinks most days Pac would've been so much better off if he hadn't have met Fit. He doesn't know how to explain he's the reason Pac has a prosthetic leg, he doesn't know how to explain half of the story—

He doesn't know if he even *should* .

"I think I was more lucky to have him," Fit laughs because it's so much easier than crying. "He was the one who saved us all y'know? I don't know how long he, Cellbit and Jaiden had been planning it but… they got us out."

It takes four weeks to find the fighting ring that *sometimes* some of their friends are in. It takes a further five days of going every day until one of them sees someone that they know. Thirty-three days, more than a month.

The room itself is disgusting, it's mostly the type of people that Pac has long learnt to avoid on the streets. These aren't the highly tattooed people— these are the people in business suits and with saccharine smiles that Pac wants to rip off of their fucking faces.

Cellbit, Jaiden and Pac manage to sneak in well enough. They've had enough practice after four days of sneaking into the ring. There's a door that leads underneath the seats that no one looks at. No one looks underneath the grandstands that are level with the fighting pit. Meaning they've had perfect views of the fights up until now.

If a fighter looks too closely they can probably see the three of them huddled underneath the grandstand as the people sitting and standing above them clap and cheer, stomping their feet and drinking and smoking and whatever else.

In the actual fighting grounds there are two doors on either side that lead to *somewhere* that none of them have figured out.

Pac thinks it leads to some kind of resting room— maybe with benches, maybe with beds. Cellbit thinks it leads to whatever facility they're keeping everyone in. Jaiden thinks it's probably just a room they chuck people in before shoving them into a car.

Either way, they've been steadily learning more and more about this facility. If Pac can sneak in as a healer— (which he *knows* they have here, he's seen healing being done on the fighters) then maybe he can do something about all of this.

Talk to Fit or break him out or get more information or *anything* really. It would be so much better than just knowing nothing.

Then the screaming starts up, and Pac's eyes immediately dart upwards. He can't see much more than the back of people's heels moving and stomping, a few people stand up as a muffled speaker says *something* that gets people cheering more.

It's Fit.

Pac feels his heart drop and he doesn't know why.

He didn't realise how much he missed Fit until he's standing there— his hair has grown out and it looks weird. No longer is his hair shaved close to his head the way Fit's had it for— as long as Pac has known him— it's longer.

Pac opens his mouth to say something.

Jaiden clamps her hand over Pac's mouth. She doesn't say anything, she just shakes her head.

Pac tries to fight her off, but Jaiden is stronger than he is.

"Look at him." Cellbit hisses in his ear. "Is that your Fit?"

Pac's entire body locks up the best it can and he just looks straight ahead, keeping his eyes trained on Fit. Something about Fit's movements aren't right— Pac doesn't know much more than that. They're jittery in a way that Fit never is.

He spends a long few moments with his eyes trained on Fit.

Then he shakes his head.

Fit's head jerks to the side.

And Pac doesn't have much medical training but his head immediately starts screaming at him to try and identify the problem. The jitteriness could be explained by a lot of things— adrenaline beginning to crash or general nerves, this seems like a fight for someone's life, not the sorts of fights Fit was used to.

Pac pushes closer, Jaiden still keeps her grip on him but Pac leans forwards to try and see better. The jitteriness isn't right— Pac's seen adrenaline crashing and he's seen anxiety attacks but this sort of jitteriness is more associated with—

Drug use.

It's more associated with hard drug use.

"They've drugged them," Pac says.

"Huh?" Jaiden says. "What do you mean— they've drugged them?"

"They've been drugged. I don't know what with— it's uh, probably a stimulant of some kind?" Pac's eyes scan to the other person in the ring, a young girl who looks fucking terrified. She doesn't look like she's been drugged, she looks too afraid for that.

The fight starts and Pac immediately brings his hand up to his mouth. The way Fit moves is wrong— it's too quick, it's too scrappy. Pac knows how Fit fights, he's lived a life seeing how Fit fights. Fit fights quickly, it's scrappy— but it's quick, he's not trying to draw anything out nor is he hitting for the sake of it.

When the girl Fit's facing doesn't hit the floor in the first couple of punches, the feeling something's wrong settles in Pac's stomach even more. Something is *seriously* wrong, Fit seems to be punching for the enjoyment of violence— not to win.

The fight is unbalanced— the girl manages to get a few good hits in but Fit is clearly the better fighter and that hurts Pac's heart a little bit— she doesn't deserve this. Fit doesn't

either.

As the fight goes on the girl backs up more and more, until she's essentially fighting against the barrier that separates the fighting ring from where they're standing. All of them stand at the back of the area, praying to not be seen as the girl tries to duck out of punches and kicks that she's not fast enough to avoid.

Fit clocks her in the jaw and her head snaps to the side, she hits the ground with a thump.

Desperately her eyes scan around wildly before landing on Pac.

"Help me," she doesn't say it— if she did it would have gotten drowned out by the screaming and chanting of the crowd. But Pac hears it anyway, he sees her mouth move and he sees her eyes plead.

Pac takes a step forwards—

There's a wet noise, something crunches and then Pac watches as pinkish-greyish substance slowly starts trickling out of her nose. Something like ground meat just slowly leaving her nose and hitting the ground.

Jaiden audibly gasps. Cellbit's eyes go wide.

Pac draws his hand back, as his eyes scan back up to the arena, and a certain Fit— (Pac isn't even sure if he should call this person Fit, this isn't Fit, Pac knows that the way he knows his own names.) Storms towards the side of the grandstand, storms towards where the girl's eyes are going to be forever open.

It feels like a dull realisation in Pac's chest.

Fit (it's not Fit, not really) just tried to pull someone's brain matter out of their nose.

He succeeded.

It's on the floor and Pac is staring at it, unsure whether to settle his gaze on Fit or on the girl with the open eyes.

There's a moment where Fit makes eye contact with him.

He swings his fist towards the wooden barrier separating them.

Jaiden grabs Pac's hand without hesitation, and starts dragging him away from it. Pac doesn't look away from Fit until he physically can't see him anymore— it's wrong, it's not Fit. He *knows* that it's not Fit but he doesn't know who else this would be.

It's so wrong. Fit isn't *like this* .

Eventually, they make it out of the labyrinth that is the bottom floor of the fighting ring. Pac's brain feels like fuzz, he's just uselessly repeating the same words over and over in his head. That this isn't right— this isn't Fit.

The cold night air meets them, Cellbit grabs Pac's other arm and he's quickly dragged down a random street. "Blood manipulation?" Cellbit hisses. "If he goes against my sister he'll kill her— and probably enjoy it—"

"Fit wouldn't just *do that* ," Pac hisses, "he's not— he's not like that."

"I'd say otherwise," Cellbit snarls back. "He's a Miller's kid."

"I am not waiting until you see *your* loved one like that," Pac snarls. "I know that's not him — I know that's not—"

Cellbit looks at him for a long moment, expression blank

"We have to save them *now* ," Pac keeps his voice as calm as he can. "If they're having regular drug usage they're at risk of all kinds of problems. I— what if they turn them against each other, Cellbit."

"He's right," Jaiden says. "The longer we wait the riskier it is. They could— they could already be gone. The only one we know is alright is Fit."

Cellbit looks between the both of them, blinking slowly. Then Cellbit crouches on the ground and pulls out a notebook with what seems to be a rough outline of what Cellbit seems to think the fighting ring looks like.

Jaiden and Pac crouch down by him.

"The medics go in this way," Cellbit points at one side of the building. "They wear all black. We sneak you in like that Pac. I think there might be a window that leads to a storeroom— Jaiden and I will go through that. We have to wait until tomorrow afternoon, it's too late to try anything now."

Pac nods.

"We meet up here—" Cellbit points at another place on the map. "This is the only place we *know* exists, the bar for the people watching. That's where we meet. I know my layout has a lot of problems— from there we try to sneak down to the fighters. With Pac as a medic that should be easy… then we get our families back."

"We could've done this before?" Jaiden asks, desperation seeping into her voice. "You were just *waiting* , while our friends got drugged every night—"

"It's no use going in with no information," Cellbit snaps. "If we die or get caught no one is coming to save them… no one is coming to save us."

The three of them look between each other, finding the same calmness and determination mirrored in each other's eyes.

"Let's do this," Jaiden says. "I want my best friend back."

“I don’t really know what happened in the fighting rings to Fit,” Pac confesses, leaning back on his hands. “I knew what happened to the others— Roier and Bagi talked about it— so did Charlie and Tina— Fit never really talked about it.”

“Seems like Fit doesn’t talk about anything.” Tubbo replies.

“Not really,” there’s a glimmer of sadness on Pac’s face as he says it. He frowns for a few more seconds before shaking his head. “From what I learnt from the others… the people in charge learnt Fit was a blood manipulator very early on. He was one of the better fighters, Fit did the most fights.”

“He was also drugged the most?” Tubbo asks slowly.

Pac nods. “By far. He had bad withdrawals when he eventually got out y’know? The others didn’t really have that.”

Tubbo leans back. “I’ve never really thought about blue withdrawals.”

“Most people don’t get them. They either… don’t stop doing the drug or never do enough to get withdrawals. Fit had withdrawals not long after we started having to run from everything — it was all a bit of a mess!” Pac laughs, but there’s still awkwardness and concern in his posture. His face twists a little bit. “What else happened— oh yeah!”

Pac lets out a short laugh, before leaning back. He rolls up the pant leg of his jumpsuit, revealing a rather nice prosthetic leg.

The prosthetic leg is noticeably not a blade one, and is certainly not one Pac should be sleeping while wearing. Has he been scared of Tubbo this entire time? That revealing a prosthetic would become a weakness that Tubbo could exploit?

Couldn’t Pac heal limbs in his prime? Hadn’t they talked about that when Tubbo first got here?

The prosthetic is a blue mechanical thing, something that seems built to purpose and maybe not even that painful if someone wore it overnight. It’s different to what Tubbo’s seen from Techno’s prosthetic leg. It seems to only go up to Pac’s upper calf.

Tubbo’s mouth falls open. “How’d that happen?”

Pac hesitates for a few seconds. “It— it uh— it got infected. Turns out the rest of the group was useless when it came to this sort of stuff… they thought it was fine then they called someone else in and they realised it would have to be cut off.”

“How’d it get infected?” Tubbo asks, slowly, not sure if he’s allowed to.

Pac hesitates again. “Fit. It was— it was Fit.”

“Huh?”

“When people are drugged they don’t do things that are right, Tubbo.” Pac glances back down to his prosthetic leg. He taps his fingers on it, and the sound of the metal rings out through the room. “He didn’t mean to…”

Tubbo just looks at him for a few seconds. “I just thought—”

“What? That the power of love will stop someone who’s not themselves doing violence on you?” Pac laughs before shaking his head. “That’s not how the real world works, Tubbo. Fit was on the verge of overdosing, he was violent and barely knew who he was— me being there didn’t change anything about that fact.”

“And you’re okay with that?” Tubbo frowns.

Pac nods. “Of course I am. Love wasn’t going to override basic medical facts… especially when it comes to blue. I’m just glad it was me, someone who would’ve forgiven him for anything and not one of the others.”

“I think you two have the weirdest relationship in the world.”

The smile that comes across Pac’s face is truly and really disgusting. It’s all dopey heart-eyes, and for a moment Tubbo really thinks that Pac is going to burst into another rant about how amazing and strong and powerful and beautiful Fit is.

Instead, Pac straightens up a little bit. “So— next we had to get all of our friends after the arena.”

Fit doesn’t remember much from his time in the arena.

There’s no fun little anecdote to tell, there’s nothing that Fit can say that sums up the overwhelming feeling of terror all the time. There’s nothing solid in those memories, just floating memories of blood and drugs and not feeling like yourself.

It’s fuzzy— and not quite him.

He remembers Tina and Charlie. He remembers Roier and Bagi. He remembers the other people they put there, but they’re all so much more fuzzier as a concept. He remembers one time sitting on the floor throwing up and a group of people around him talking about like he was going to die.

Fit’s still surprised he didn’t die.

It’s not something he likes to talk about— he doesn’t remember most of it, he doesn’t want to remember any of it. He certainly doesn’t want to talk about it.

The fighting rings fade into a fuzzy memory of fear, blood and drugs. Not too dissimilar to Miller’s. It seems like good chunks of Fit’s life have been trying to forget the awful things that have happened to him.

He’s mostly succeeded.

One thing Fit does remember, will *not* let himself forget goes like this.

He's not himself— he's drugged up beyond his eyeballs. He's too rabid to contain in the main rooms, they're preparing him for some special sort of fight.

Then this thing that Fit has been made into sees a flash of blue and black. And so Fit attacks.

He remembers the taste of blood in his mouth.

Pac stands up as straight as possible as he approaches the side of the building. His hands aren't shaking because of the sheer amount of effort Pac is putting in to make sure they don't. He's clad in black clothes, various bits and pieces they managed to put together through everyone's wardrobes.

He's pretty sure he's wearing one of Bagi's jackets, and a pair of Roier's pants. Either way, he looks like he belongs walking towards the side of the building. He manages to keep himself as calm as possible.

If he fails here— Fit at least is lost forever.

While Cellbit and Jaiden will probably carry out the mission, Pac is the one who cares about Fit. There's no confirmation that either of them will try and bother to *find* Fit, let alone save him. If Pac fails he loses himself and his greatest friend.

The fighting ring itself takes place in an old town hall which might have used to be something. The old town hall of course is the front of it, there's another section in a basement which is where the actual fighting happens.

On the top floor is where food and drinks can be served beforehand. It's how the medics get in, it's where the healers talk and hang out before finding the fighters. That's where Pac will be entering— what they *think* is the medic wing.

They're not sure though.

All they're sure about is a bar.

Cellbit and Jaiden have long split off from him. They have no way of communication— they have no way of knowing what the other is doing *unless* they find each other in the bar.

He approaches the side of the building, hands jammed into his pockets and eyes darting between the two guards standing either side of the door. They don't look particularly trained nor qualified, which gives Pac a little bit of confidence.

One is leaning against the side of the wall, bored and the other is actively reading a book.

This shouldn't be too hard.

With the confidence of someone that belongs there, Pac raises his chin and walks towards the door as quickly as he can.

The guard reading looks up from her book and tilts her head at him a little bit. “Can we help you?” she says.

Pac looks between the two of them. “I’m here to work.”

Both guards glance him up and down quickly. He’s clearly in the clothes that the healers wear — black because blood stains less on black. He’s wearing a shiny black sports jacket, which could have spills wiped off easily.

Both guards look at each other, then look at Pac. “Alright then— go on in.”

Pac walks up the few stairs between them and into whatever fucking chaos he’s about to walk into. And indeed, it is chaos. It’s not even close to fight time and people are already talking and eating lunch and drinking.

The area Pac’s walked into seems to be a dining area of some sort, there’s a table of people all wearing black talking very quickly to each other. One of them bites into a burger and half of the toppings falls out the other side.

More people litter around this room, all crowded around various rectangle tables. The floor is wooden, there’s a few paintings on the wall that look not tasteful at all, and look like what someone who’s trying to be fancy would buy. Cutlery and plates scrape against each other over the sound of some country music Pac is beginning to despise. The air smells like frying oil, sweat and alcohol and Pac scowls at the smell slightly.

Pac glances back over at the people in all black talking animatedly— they’re also clearly healers, all dresses similarly to Pac. One is wearing an actual rubbish bag. Most of them have bloodied hands.

“—Sarafin does it,” he hears one of them say absent-mindedly. “His guys are always winning — apparently they do freaky training.”

“Really?”

“Mhm. They think they’re putting theirs on steroids.”

That sounds about right. The twitchiness Fit exhibited could be because of steroids— something about it just doesn’t sit quite right. Pac can’t articulate it, but it feels wrong somehow. Still, Pac turns on his heel and walks towards this other group of healers.

Most of them seem older than him, not like that’s particularly difficult. They all turn towards him almost in sync— it’s a little bit unnerving.

Pac gives the group a small smile, “hi!”

“Hi,” one of the boys says, apparently the friendliest of all of them. “You’re one of us I’m guessing?”

Pac nods.

The boy shuffles over, gesturing for Pac to come sit next to him. Pac rushes over, sitting on the bench next to the boy. He knows he should be looking for the bar— he also knows that healers and medics generally have the best insight into the state of a place.

He also knows that they might be talking about Fit.

“Where are you from?” one of them asks. “I haven’t seen you around here before.”

“I’m new,” Pac says because that’s technically not *untrue* , “I think I was hired because Sarafin’s people are—”

“Violent as *fuck* ,” one of them finish for Pac.

Success. Pac didn’t just put his foot in his mouth and has successfully integrated himself as someone who knows *something* about this place. Pac has no fucking clue who Sarafin is— he probably isn’t going to find out.

“His last guy ripped a girl’s brain out through her nose,” one of them shudders. “For some reason they thought that was fixable— sorry I can’t bring your best fighter back, her brain has exploded in her head.”

Pac isn’t sure if he’s breathing.

“I heard Sarafin’s fighters are kept in a cell place— the idea is getting more tempting from other people.”

“Is that not expensive?”

“Incredibly— but you’ve seen Sarafin’s fighters, they’re earning that money back and more. This is before we start including sponsors. Maybe they’re just training really hard.”

“Seems more like drugs to me,” one of them mutter. “They’re all— twitchy and weird, that’s more common in hard drug use than training hard… I guess they could be on really weird steroids?”

“You reckon they’re just giving them methamphetamines?”

“It kind of lines up— not all the symptoms work though.”

And Pac— doesn’t like that this group of people who all seem decently trained can’t figure out what drugs Fit and the others are being given. Something about the entire thing seems *off* , surely they’d be able to recognise a drug these people are being given?

Pac bites on his fingernails for a few seconds as he tries to think. These are all people from Logstedchire, they should all be able to recognise the effects of someone on all of the common types of drugs.

This isn’t right.

So Pac stands up abruptly, everyone looking at him. “Sorry— I just realised I had to meet up with the person in charge— I totally forgot!”

A few of them laugh, nodding. “Cindy should be in the bar.”

Jackpot.

“Where is that sorry?” Pac looks around cluelessly, there’s a couple of doors around but otherwise it’s quite hard to see much else. There’s the door out of here, and there’s a door that seemingly leads to a bathroom of some kind.

Across this room there are two other doors— Pac assumes one goes to the bar and the other starts the descent under the stairs— but there still might be hallways or mysterious closets or a whole variety of things that Pac hasn’t considered.

The friendlier boy smiles, “through the left door— then you turn right. There’s a hallway and it’s at the end of that. There’s a couple of offices and medical rooms on the way up there, I’m sure Cindy will give you the full tour. Nice to meet you.”

Pac nods absentmindedly, before turning on his heel and rushing towards the left door. He shoves the door open with his shoulder before rushing down the hallway. Hopefully Cellbit and Jaiden have made it in— if they haven’t Pac’s going to do drastic things.

The hallway is empty, but as he goes down it gets louder and louder until Pac can hear glasses clinking and coins clattering. Still all relatively quieter than the dining area, but louder than the silence of the hallway.

He swings the door open to reveal a smaller space, in the middle is a bar with a kitchenette behind it. There’s a couple of people sitting at the bar. There’s a couple of tables scattered around, a TV is playing some news footage at a low volume that no one is paying attention to. The bartender talks to a group of people.

Sitting at one of the tables, looking at a short glass filled with amber coloured liquid is Cellbit and Jaiden. Cellbit is staring at the drink like it’s going to kill him, Jaiden is doubled over— for a second Pac thinks she’s dead.

Then he realises that she’s laughing.

Pac heads over to them, being careful not to make any eye contact with anyone. Jaiden looks up from where she’s collapsed over from laughter. “They thought he was eighteen.”

“Huh?” Pac looks at Cellbit, who very much looks about fourteen years old. “That’s brutal.”

Cellbit stares at the drink in front of him. “I want to drink it.”

“No.”

“It looks good.”

“No,” Pac picks up the drink and looks at it with slightly narrowed eyes. “If we survive this — maybe.”

“It is *so* illegal for us to have alcohol.” Jaiden says.

“Unlike this, which I’m sure is perfectly legal.” Cellbit stands up, he brushes himself off before looking at the strand of white hair that falls into his face. “Do I really look that old?”

“Yes.” Jaiden says.

“No.” Pac says at the same time.

They both glance at each other.

Cellbit just grumbles, he takes the glass off of Pac before dropping it in front of someone sitting at the bar. Without another word Cellbit stalks off towards the door, he looks *incredibly* grumpy which is quite impressive even for him.

Jaiden and Pac scramble after him, muttering apologies as they shimmy past the chairs to get to Cellbit. Cellbit swings the door open with one hand, before nearly stomping down the hallway. Pac almost trips over his own feet trying to catch up to him.

“If they ask,” Cellbit says evenly, and certainly not in English. “I am showing you and Jaiden around the facilities— you’re both new. You’re a medic, she’s working the bar shift around fights.”

“Does she know this?” Pac gives Jaiden a quick glance, she clearly doesn't know Portuguese considering the confused look on her face.

“Yes.”

With that, Cellbit pushes through the door the Pac had avoided on the way to the bar. There’s no hesitation in the action, and Pac does his best to look like he is also supposed to be here. Jaiden sets her shoulders back and glances over her shoulder.

The door reveals a stairwell that the three of them basically sprint down. Their footsteps ring out around the small stairwell.

Cellbit is the first off the stairwell, pushing another door open with his shoulder and then promptly stopping. Pac runs into his back and Cellbit hisses at him, the way a cat would, not the way a human would.

Pac gives him a flat look, and Cellbit rolls his eyes.

The stairwell leads out to a large open area. There are people moving around, albeit slowly as they try and get things done. There are crates, and Pac can see people with clipboards. From this large room, there are several doors that seem to branch off and a large set of doors which Pac knows leads to the actual fighting ring.

A few people look at the three of them, confused, but no one really seems to pay it much mind. They all carry on with the things they have to do, shoving boxes around and making sure ticketing systems work— or whatever people who work at fighting rings do.

Cellbit slowly starts moving towards one of the doors. He does it with a confidence Pac is sure he does *not* feel all things considered.

“Wait,” Pac hisses in Portuguese. “Let me ask someone something—”

“And give us away?” Cellbit hisses back.

“It’ll be fine, you crybaby.” Pac replies evenly, their tone sounds incredibly polite to someone who doesn’t know what they’re actually saying, which Pac supposes is the point. Pac turns on his heel and walks towards the first person he spots, a boy hauling what looks like a heavy box.

The boy looks up slowly, confusion on his face at why someone is approaching him.

“Hi!” Pac says with a smile. “I was wondering what door leads to Sarafin’s? He’s called me in to check on his fighters— I’m relatively new and was just wondering—”

The boy looks at Pac with an incredulous look for a few moments. He blinks a few times before screwing up his face. “Uh— door on the left closest to the main entrance. Glad Sarafin is finally fucking sending in healers— his guys are all kinds of fucked up.”

Pac laughs and pretends that hearing that doesn’t make him want to die inside just a little bit. He whirls back around towards Jaiden and Cellbit, gesturing at the right door before walking to catch up with them.

Cellbit frowns. “Sarafin?”

“The guy spearheading whatever’s happening to our people,” Pac keeps his voice low, even if the language is one that he doubts anyone else can understand. Cellbit and Bagi made the assumption someone didn’t know Portuguese and they got the shit kicked out of them for it. (Thanks Fit.) “Talked to some of the other healers— they don’t know what drugs they’ve been given.”

“That’s… worrying.”

“That’s what I thought,” Pac stops in front of the door.

The door is inherently no different than all of the other doors that they’ve walked past, except Pac knows the chances that Fit is around here somewhere is incredibly high. They still have no plan to get everyone out, which he’s a bit nervous about, but otherwise it’s fine.

All of their planning and bullshittery has really led to this.

Pac opens the door slowly.

He doesn't know what he expects to see— probably people getting drugged out of their mind or something else along those lines. Instead, what he sees is a large empty foyer area. There are a few doors branching off from where they are, but otherwise the foyer room itself is nearly empty.

Pac steps into the room slowly, Cellbit and Jaiden fanning out either side of him as they all look around the room. Pac's eyes scan around looking for anything, there's a large fake plant which is always ideal. Otherwise there's not a lot of signs of life.

Cellbit approaches the side of one of the walls, running his fingers along it. "There are scratch marks here."

"Huh?" Jaiden says.

"They've tried to paint over them," he says with a frown. He withdraws his hand slowly before squinting at the wall slightly. "I don't like that."

"There has to be somewhere that they keep everyone, right?" Jaiden says. "Why is it so empty here?"

"I'm guessing there's a way to funnel people to the fighting ring without having to go through here. Like sheep. Here would just be for— the people in charge."

"And still… no one is here?" Pac says slowly. "That doesn't make sense—"

There's a shriek that comes through one of the doors.

Everyone turns towards it.

For a second Pac sees Cellbit's entire face go pale and his eyes go wider. "Bagi!" He yells. Cellbit scrambles towards the door, and Pac and Jaiden have no other choice but to run after him.

Cellbit slams through the door with his shoulder, the door swings open with a crunch.

In this room, behind literal iron bars is a girl that Pac vaguely recognises— she still has the same split hair that she's always had, half brown and half white. Her hair is scraggly though, it's dirty and has blood laced through it. She's wearing a ratty plain grey jumpsuit that Pac recognises that Fit was wearing when he last saw him—

More alarmingly, two adults are standing over Bagi, one of them with a needle.

Bagi's eyes snap over to the three of them, and her expression shifts entirely when her eyes land on Cellbit. Her face both softens and hardens— affection towards her brother, and determination towards whatever adults are standing over her.

So Bagi kicks her leg out, getting one of them in the shin.

Cellbit runs towards the small door on the iron bars. He kicks it open, seemingly shattering a locking mechanism if there was one. With a grunt Cellbit forces his way into the small cell

and grabs one of the adults by the back of their shirt, before punching them in the side of the head.

“Holy shit,” Jaiden mutters, before also throwing herself into the fight. She goes for the one right in front of Bagi, moving past Cellbit and the other adult fighting. She grabs the scientist lady by the hair and pulls.

And Pac— Pac manages to get past both fights and towards Bagi.

He crouches on the ground in front of her, scanning for injuries. There are several cuts on her face and knuckles, her lip is split and blood trickles from it still. Around her neck are several cuts and bruises—

Bruises that Pac has long learnt to associate with drug use.

“I can heal,” Pac says. “I can make it better.”

Bagi just nods, her eyes closing.

Pac puts both of his hands on Bagi’s face, being careful not to disturb any of the open wounds that she has. He channels his energy into his hands, and feels a gentle sort of feeling start to leave him. He wills the cuts to fuse together, he wills the aches to stop and he hopes and hopes that the bruises fade and Bagi feels more comfortable.

When Pac lets go of Bagi’s face she does look better.

In fact, she looks so much better that she essentially jumps over him and sends herself flying at the scientist-adult that Cellbit is fighting. Bagi is a much better fighter than her brother— there’s something generally feral and desperate about the way she fights in comparison to Cellbit.

Pac doesn’t want to think about why that is.

What Pac does notice, because he’s honestly abysmal at fighting is a dropped needle on the ground.

Jaiden, Cellbit and Bagi all fight around it. Their footsteps all darting around them with a practiced ease that Pac sort of envies.

So, like an idiot, Pac reaches for it.

The needle itself looks pretty standard, the actual needle is shorter than it probably should be but it makes sense if they’re injecting things into people. The thing that makes Pac stop and stare is the colour.

It’s bright blue.

Pac has rarely ever seen anything as blue as the liquid in this needle. It has small specs of something floating in it that gives the liquid an almost shimmering quality. Pac tilts it to the

side to test for viscosity. It's thicker than water, maybe about the same thickness as cough syrup.

If this is a drug— it is not a drug that Pac is even slightly fucking aware of.

Bagi shrieks again, and Pac tears his eyes away from the needle in his hand. Bagi is repeatedly kicking the scientist in the side. Just over and over again.

Jaiden seems to have handled the other person, having ripped cloth off of her own clothes to use as a makeshift rope. There's one around their hands and a scrap of fabric shoved into their mouth.

Pac doesn't really want to think about why Jaiden is so effective at this. It's probably better for everyone if he doesn't.

"Bagi— Bagi—" Cellbit is saying. "It's okay— it's okay, they're not a problem anymore— you're safe."

Bagi lets a noise out of her throat, falling onto her knees as tears start to roll down her face. Cellbit falls onto his knees in front of her, wrapping her up in a hug that makes her cry harder.

Jaiden and Pac look at each other. Never before has Pac had so much solidarity around the fact that he should not be in a place or watching a moment like this. So Pac walks around them, being as careful as he can to try and give them privacy in this tiny cell.

He holds the needle out towards Jaiden.

Jaiden's eyebrows furrow and she takes it out of Pac's hand. She moves it side to side like Pac did before. "Is this what they're giving them?"

"I think so…" Pac says slowly, he squints at the item like that'll make it make more sense. He frowns slightly. "Is this a drug you're aware of— most drugs like this aren't a liquid?"

"Weird…" Jaiden hands it back to Pac. "It could be a new one? New ones are hitting the street all the time."

"It looks too well designed honestly," Pac looks back at it again. "It's clearly a synthetic drug — but who made it?"

"Some sick guy who wanted to win in fighting rings?" Jaiden suggests.

"Maybe…" Pac stares at the needle for a few more seconds. Then he shoves it in his jacket pocket. He's aware that it's slightly unsafe, but it's not like he has a lot of other options. Putting it in his jacket pocket is safer than his pants pockets at least.

Then Jaiden and Pac are standing in awkward silence as they very obviously try not to interrupt the siblings or intrude on their moment. Pac very much feels like he is not supposed to be there— and half debates walking out of the door.

Instead, Jaiden takes matters into her own hands. “Hi—” she says.

Bagi leans back from her brother, wiping her eyes. “Hi,” she whispers back.

“I’m Jaiden… uh— I’ve heard a lot about you. It’s good to finally meet you.”

Bagi’s eyes go wide at the name. “You’re Roier’s friend?”

Jaiden nods.

“He’s— he’s in the room over— we need to go and— before they drug him—”

That gets all of them into action.

Roier, Jaiden’s friend, is indeed in the next room. He has brown hair and a scrap of fabric tied around his head with the intent of trying to keep his hair out of his face. He’s wearing the same type of jumpsuit Bagi is, and looks noticeably less beat up.

A scientist isn’t standing over Roier as such, the scientist more seems to be waiting for Roier to stop talking.

And Roier is chatting otherwise joyously, not giving a single fuck. “And then I was like— that’s kinda super rude, man, why’d you do that for? And he was like— I’m going to fight you! Which felt a bit rude to me but—”

Roier trails off as he spies the group of them, he breaks out into a smile as soon as he sees Jaiden. “Oh you’re fucked!” Roier yells with delight. “You’re in big trouble now—” then Roier promptly stands up and headbutts the scientist in the face.

Pac knows that getting involved in the fights at this point just makes him in the way. Fit told him that a while ago, and Pac can see the point of it. Even between Bagi, Roier, Cellbit and Jaiden it’s getting crowded.

Instead Pac stands completely outside the cell. He really feels like moral support.

Stacked on top of a box resting outside the cell is a bunch of papers. Most of them seem to be about shipments and other things Pac can’t be bothered to read. The address is somewhere in Logstedchire that Pac doesn’t know— it seems to be in the industrial district of Logstedchire though.

Pac stays frowning at the papers for a few more moments. The most noticeable thing he finds is an interesting note on the extra notes section.

Extra notes from sender: Thank you for the work you’re doing Victor, it has proven to be incredibly valuable back here.

- William

The only other interesting thing he’s able to find while the four of these people beat the shit out of the science person is the word ‘Kyaukos’, it seems to be the name of whatever is being

shipped.

When the various sounds of hitting and punching end Pac looks up from the papers. This guy has also been bound and restrained. No one looks particularly hurt which is always nice it means Pac doesn't have to use too much more of his powers.

"Does anyone know a William who is like… relevant to life?" Pac asks.

There's a long moment of silence. "What's the context?"

"Thank you note to someone named Victor, from some guy named William."

Everyone looks blank, like not once before in their life they've had thoughts.

Pac puts the papers down. He looks between Roier and Bagi, Roier and Jaiden have grabbed each other and are now talking at each other with a speed that means Pac truly can not keep up with it. He's not even sure if they're both speaking the same language. Jaiden's arms are gripped around Roier's forearms and Roier is grinning so widely it looks painful.

Cellbit is also looking at Roier.

Pac catalogues that information for no reason in particular.

"And Fit?" Pac asks, unable to really keep the hope out of his voice.

"He'd be down the hall," Bagi stumbles out of the cell, kicking the scientist in the side as she walks out. "He's not supposed to be fighting tonight I don't think— he'd be with the others. He'd be— yeah."

Pac turns and starts heading towards whatever door and whatever hallway Bagi is talking about.

"Wait— wait— wait—" Bagi catches Pac's wrist. "There's going to be a fight in there— maybe you should leave it to us— I just don't want you to get hurt, and uh—"

"Fit's going to need *sooo* much healing," Roier says, incredibly unhelpfully. "He's really fucked up."

Jaiden elbows him in the side.

"We just don't want you to waste your energy," Bagi says, "not if you'd rather… spend it on helping Fit."

Pac frowns.

While Pac isn't a *good* fighter by any means, he's not *awful.* He can also see the practicality of it though— it'll probably be several teenagers fighting several adults and Pac will probably have to do healing anyway. That's before considering if Fit is *'really fucked up'* .

Keeping a healer out of the fight also isn't illogical.

Pac just hates that it makes sense— he wants to grit his teeth and tell them all that he *is* capable and he does know what he's doing. He's not weak or whatever they seem to think. Everyone else got to save their person—

And Pac wants to save his.

Instead, Pac nods slowly. "Yeah… okay. That makes sense."

Bagi and Cellbit both give each other a 'yikes' look and Pac resists the urge to half beat them both to death very well. He probably wouldn't be capable of it anyway because he's a shit fighter according to them.

He misses Fit.

The others dart in front of Pac slightly, all of them giving him a slightly worried look as they pass him. The four of them head up towards the door, and Roier takes a deep breath.

With a squeak the door opens and the immediate chaos starts. Pac stands there for a few seconds, being willing to run into the fight and then he realises he will probably be useless.

Instead, he looks around the hallway.

To his right is a door with a small window in it. Pac stands up as tall as he can to peer into the room. There's a light on, but the room seems empty. In the centre of the room is a desk— there's a filing cabinet and a bookshelf. Things are thrown about the room in a way that seems… not right.

There's books and papers strewn around on the floor around the desk. The desk chair is tipped over and the upholstery has been ripped out of the chair and thrown around the room.

Pac listens to the various noises of fighting— it seems like his people are winning. Which… they did gain however many kids were in that room, so that alone makes sense.

Slowly, Pac pushes the door open.

There's a distinctive smell of paper and books as Pac pushes through into the office. A lack of personal objects feels particularly noticeable. There are no frames of things, no tiny pot plant, it looks like someone set it up to be a display office.

Pac doesn't like that—

He reaches back to open the door and—

It's locked.

The door has locked behind him.

Pac tries to open it again before sighing. When the fight is over he can get someone's attention— he is aware this is under the assumption that his friends will win. If Fit's with them they'll win easily.

He steps further into the office, eyes scanning around for anything to jump out at him. Despite being lit up the room is quite dark, only an ominous fluorescent hanging lightbulb providing the lighting in the room.

The bookshelves look like people.

Still, Pac moves forwards as slowly as he can. He reaches for one of the pieces of paper on the ground that don't look ripped up. It's a letter from someone named William Nelson-Jones, Pac doesn't know who the fuck that is, but it's probably the same William from earlier.

He crouches on the ground, picking up more of the papers to try and understand anything slightly. More shipment reports to a place on the industrial side of Logstedchire— which might be where Sarafin's people are housed until fighting rings.

Mentions of Kyaukos again.

Are those drugs? Is the drug they're injecting people with called Kyaukos?

A letter from Victor Sarafin saying thank you for funding— it's half written with a series of notes stapled on the back of it.

The address makes Pac almost drop the paper.

7–23 High Street .

Pac knows that address.

Everyone knows that address.

Pac's mother received letters from that address— apologies for the loss of her husband, announcements that she would not be eligible for spouse's compensation.

The hero tower.

It's being sent back to the heroes.

It's— clearly a half written report meant to go back to the hero tower. The address is on it. Every kid in L'Manberg knows that address. It clearly mentions symptoms such as heightened aggression and heighted use of powers.

Fit is mentioned— not *as* Fit, but as *12 (Blood Manipulation)* and discussions of how much more powerful he's gotten because of the drugs.

More thank you notes for funding to someone named William Nelson-Jones.

He stares, and he stares.

Pac stares at the piece of paper in his hands for a long few seconds. His eyes bore into it.

It's the heroes—

They're the ones funding Victor Sarrafin. They're the reason Pac's friends have been locked up and drugged— they're testing something about superpowers. They're trying to create things that should never be created.

They're *succeeding* in creating things that should have never been created.

Pac holds onto the wall as he tries to breathe, he shoves as a much as he can into his pockets. His breath isn't coming out right— it feels like things are starting to crumble. Did his father know about this?

Who knew about this?

Then there's a noise behind Pac. The noise of something mixed between footsteps and a sigh.

And Pac does remember looking up after hearing the noise. He remembers how he craned his head around and standing in front of the door, with a crazed look in his eyes was Fit. He remembers both the flood of relief and terror that filled his body at the same time.

Even from this limited interaction Pac knew that Fit wasn't himself— he knew based on the bruising around his neck and the cuts that come from trying to fight injections. Whatever drug the heroes have created— whatever hell they've released on this earth.

Fit is currently living it.

It wasn't really Fit.

But still, Pac would rather it be Fit than anyone else.

He remembers the moment of silence that stretched out between them, and how Fit's eyes were almost glowing blue.

"Hi." Pac says, because he has missed Fit all this time later. Seeing his face, being close enough to touch— it's nice.

Fit doesn't say anything to him, Pac knew that he wouldn't.

So Pac slowly raises one of his hands.

Then Fit moves forwards— halfway between a leap and the way an animal pounces. He does remember the first burst of pain through his body clearly. The way it was all Pac could think about, the way his flesh tore like it was nothing—

The memories after that become blurred with pain.

He remembers teeth and blood and a lot of screaming from a lot of people. He remembers flashes of movement and more yelling.

Most of all, Pac remembers looking down at his leg and seeing the blood gushing out of it, and a tooth stuck in one of the wounds. He remembers watching his blood leaving, and passively thinking about the irony—

The healer's bleeding out.

They kept him back specifically so this didn't happen.

Somehow the memories get even more fragmented after that. Sirens and people's faces near his telling him to stay awake— red, more red. Yelling and arguing. Moving and the pain it shoots through Pac's entire body. He knows he fades in and out of consciousness— he doesn't know how long for.

The first solid memory Pac has is this:

He's laying in a bed that isn't his own, he knows this because he can't hear Fit breathing next to him. Crouched by his bed is Fit, Fit who has a mess of guilt and grief on his face— Pac is aware there are more people in the room.

He doesn't care about them though, because his Fit is here.

" *Fitche* ," he whispers and Fit's entire body grows tense. "Come here—"

Fit moves slowly until he's by Pac's bed.

Pac reaches up, wrapping his arms around Fit and pulling him down onto the bed. Fit makes a noise as he throws his arm out to keep himself from crushing Pac. Pac doesn't care, pulling Fit down more until he's half laying on top of Pac.

"I missed you," Pac whispers.

Fit makes a noise— and for a terrifying moment he thinks Fit is crying.

Pac grabs the side of Fit's face, turning it so he can look at every part of it. He looks for injuries or things that are slightly wrong. Fit's face looks as normal as ever, he looks far more tired than usual but he still looks like himself.

"Have you been okay—"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine— I'm okay—" he brushes Pac's hand away, before half rolling off of Pac so he's standing next to the bed again. He opens and closes his mouth a few times before just shaking his head. "Are you—"

Cellbit clears his throat. "How's his leg?"

"I hadn't gotten to that yet—"

Pac tries to move his left leg, tries to wiggle his toes. Nothing.

He flings the blanket off.

His left leg.

Pac stares at the blank spot on the bed where his leg is supposed to be. He immediately tries to move his foot— the familiar action yields nothing. His leg is actually not there. His upper calf just— ends there with a messy scar.

It's gone.

"My— my leg—" Pac whispers.

"It gets worse," Cellbit adds with a chuckle.

Never before has Pac been so tempted to stand up and punch Cellbit in the face. Which is a high bar considering how close Pac's gotten to punching him in the face before. Pac grits his teeth and gives Cellbit a glare.

"You're a criminal," Cellbit says.

"Huh?" Pac whispers.

"Criminal—" Cellbit pulls out a newspaper from seemingly nowhere, dropping it on Pac's lap. "Apparently you attacked a hero and also blew up a hero facility—"

"We're on the run," Fit finally cuts in, his voice shaking. "We've made ourselves enemies of the heroes."

Oh.

Oh fuck.

Chapter End Notes

HAPPY APRIL FOOLS! The real joke is on these guys LMAO. I've had the plan of updating a normal chapter on April Fools for AGES now so I'm glad I can finally do it

So… I *HAVE* run through all my backup chapters, so I literally can not confirm if we'll ever get our old schedule back. I'll keep the Thursday update times but… uh… can not make them every two weeks I fear.

I dropped like 30k in 5 days so please give me some grace!!!

End Notes

Heyo, thanks for reading! Here I have some things that you should focus your attention to if you can.

For example the Mutual Aid Wiki which shows locations around the world with mutual aid that you can either use or help out via donations and volunteering.

Organisations like Care For Gaza and eSims for Gaza . Other organisations such as Sudan Solidarity Collective , and this list of brilliant charities in Sudan . And the very important charity Friends of the Congo . All of these charities are doing brilliant work so please give anything you can, I know these are tough times but everything counts!

If you can't give money, try and give time at local volunteering places!

and. if all of that is too much to read for your empty fucking brains. ***DO NOT DONATE TO AO3 NOW OR FUCKING EVER*** spend that money on any other charity.

if you're interested in my vibe at all i also have a tumblr account that i forget to use but feel free to chuck me asks and a twitter account i rarely use.

There is also a discord server! which is probably the best place to ask questions and be the first to know whenever I publish a new chapter

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!